

Perverted by Language:  
Weird Fiction and the Semiotic Anomalies of  
a Genre

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## Abstract:

*Perverted by Language* is a genre study of weird fiction, from the golden age of the High Weird to the New Weird of today. The study specifically addresses the often-overlooked tendency of weird fiction narratives to adopt a self-theorising approach to language, text, and discourse. While speculative fiction criticism has typically focussed on the teratology of the weird—the formless, yet over-formed monstrosities described by writer China Miéville as the prototypical “eldritch, oozing, tentacled thing”—my thesis argues that weird fiction’s monsters are as much semiotic as they are morphological. The horror of weird fiction, and its representations of monstrosity, frequently takes the form of utterance, spoken question and written confession.

*Perverted by Language* focuses exclusively on the weird’s most privileged form, the short story, analysing the work of writers including Edgar Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, Thomas Ligotti, Michael Cisco, and Caitlin R. Kiernan. My thesis also examines stories by postmodern writers of the fantastic, such as Jorge Luis Borges, whose writings occasionally explore weird semiotic territory. The project draws on the work of theorists who, like the fiction writers listed above, *en-weird* language and the world of its usage. A key objective of the study is therefore to read with the grain of the weird rather than against it. Major influences include the spectral idioms of Jacques Derrida’s hauntology, the speech acts and performatives of J. L. Austin, and the non-linear, menacingly circling dialects associated with Brian Massumi’s concept of threat affect.

Chapter One assesses the attitudes and worldview of the weird as both a genre and a mode of writing, defining the field via an evaluation of differing critical approaches. Chapter Two examines the prototypical speech act in weird fiction, what I have termed “naming the unnameable.” Surveying stories that deploy this mode of negative performativity in various ways, the chapter elucidates a weird grammar of nameless things and thingless names. Chapters Three and Four form a two-chapter arc on the subject of the library, as both site and discourse, in weird fiction. Chapter Three looks at the library according to Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the literary chronotope, arguing that weird fiction’s library is its most characteristic narrative time-space. Chapter Four examines the library’s function in the weird according to Michel Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia, as a space whose normative discourses are monstrously undermined by the texts on its shelves. Chapters Five and Six discuss weird affect and grammars of affect. Chapter Five deals with the affinity between weird fiction’s brand of affect and hauntology, arguing that both rely on the spectralising of language to be

adequately conveyed. Finally, Chapter Six analyses a specific kind of affective process in the weird: namely, threat, and the manner in which threat is performed in language. The chapter contends that threat affect in the weird shares a homologous relationship with the speech act of the promise, deferring itself threateningly in language without revealing its true form.

Throughout, my overarching argument is that weird fiction fixates on the lacunae of language in order to elucidate a crisis of representation afflicting the extra-diegetic world. The weird's narratology of horror is informed by language's failure to adequately support human narratives of world and reality. However, the weird dramatises linguistic failure and negative representation to construct its own counter-narratives. Its stories depict humans as victims of language's unfathomable spirals, and a world forever on the brink of an apocalypse of signification.

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## The “Struggle to Name”: A Weird Introduction

In 2011, a discussion thread was started on *The Nightmare Network*—the official online forum for weird fiction writer Thomas Ligotti—entitled “Recommendations for weird fiction.” Bristling with the obsessive zeal accompanying any new enterprise, the author of the thread, *symbolique*, requested reading suggestions for weird fiction from fellow members of the forum. The request was clearly a sound one, given that many writers thought of as contemporary masters of weird fiction—including, but not limited to, Mark Samuels, Matt Cardin, Simon Strantzas, Richard Gavin, Joel Lane, Quentin S. Crisp, D. F. Lewis, and Wilum “Hopfrog” Pugmire—were at the time active contributors to the forum. However, when a writer—Strantzas, as it happened—finally did take the time to respond to the newcomer’s appeal, it was with a reluctant uncertainty:

Part of me wants to suggest we as a group put together an official list of recommendations to post somewhere in the Repository, but I imagine that list would veer away from Weird Fiction pretty quickly (seeing as no one can even agree on what constitutes Weird fiction). (n.p.)

What seemed initially a straightforward appeal for recommendations, and a reading list dictated by the assumed specificity of the term “Weird Fiction,” became with Strantzas’s response an appeal for clarity. The question shifted from *What is Weird Fiction?* to *what is the best Weird Fiction?* In this moment, the name of the genre under discussion, if genre it was, lost its heuristic edges. Moreover, this slipperiness was compounded by the fact that it was a weird author throwing the genre’s terminology into doubt.

This moment of doubt was followed by another, equally telling development in the discussion—a response from another user in which the weird’s taxonomic confusion was received not as a dangerous slipperiness but as promising openness to discussion:



Yes, weird fiction can be a particularly tricky label to work with, can't it? I find this very fitting however, when considering the often chameleon like and labyrinthine natures of the works in question. Still, a list of some recommended authors/titles might very well be helpful as a map to both new and old explorers of the geographies of the weird. (*Freyasfire* n.p.)

Exquisitely poised between frustration with and commitment to the label “weird,” *Freyasfire*’s comments epitomise an ambivalence found frequently in discussions of weird fiction. While agreeing with Strantzis that the weird is marked by a lack of consensus, that “no one can agree what constitutes” it, *Freyasfire* remains confident that the name is somehow the right one, that it captures something—an idea perhaps, or a sensation—intrinsic to the fiction so named. Her faith in the veracity of “weird” calls to mind Ken Gelder’s claim that genres are attitudinal, that they require “something quite fundamental to be installed at [their] core,” a “sensitivity,” or a “paradigm” that is often taken for granted, unnamed, yet easily recognisable by its discerning readers (64). At the same time however, there is a reticence to her words; one can imagine a pause taking place between her description of the “natures of the works in question” and the vaguely troubled “Still,” as if the latter somehow held in abeyance the temptation to speak further, changing the subject of the conversation. If one were to posit a subtext underlying *Freyasfire*’s comments, it might be summed up thus: *To name without naming.*

To a large extent, this thesis is guided by a similar spirit of hesitation regarding the power to name. Insofar as it is a genre study, and thus concerned with the intertextual relationships that allow literary genres to be studied over time, it is fundamentally concerned with naming. After all, the study of genres has often been a struggle over names and the right to name, the validity or non-validity of specific labels, and, especially, the way this validity shifts and evolves. Stephen Heath, while admitting that “[g]enre naming indeed can be an explicit part of the presentation of works,” argues that “names need to be understood each

time in their historical context and for the various textual effects they can produce”; names, he avers, “should not be taken for granted” (164-65). From the perspective of a critic then, the names of genres should remain the object of diachronic scrutiny. Effective analysis requires that such names be disinterred from the rubble of past literary epochs and their assumptions. What remains after such historical biases are removed are exactly the kind of core fundamentals, paradigms, and sensibilities Gelder alludes to. The attitudes of genres equate to an often unspoken, sometimes occluded spirit, a sense of world-ness which links seemingly disparate works together in a continuum.

This attitudinal sensitivity towards the question of what constitutes weird fiction is what forms much of the basis of my own approach to the weird as genre. While weird fiction has a long history of being defined as this or that—as the ghost story, as the dissolutely supernaturalist father of respectable science fiction, or as the kind of cosmic horror fiction produced by H. P. Lovecraft and his circle of devotees and fellow writers—there has always been uncertainty about what exactly constitutes the weird-as-such. S. T. Joshi, Lovecraft’s chief biographer and critic, declared, in 1990, “I am not ... prepared to define the weird tale, and venture to assert that any definition of it may be impossible” (*The Weird Tale* 2). Indeed, the shadow of this pronouncement still lingers in weird criticism. While the shared reluctance to define the weird can be partly accounted for by the fact that the term “weird fiction” hails from a time before fantasy, science fiction, and horror gained heuristic clarity—in other words, before they were adopted as distinguishable and marketable genre names—it can also be traced to a more esoteric source, residing, perhaps, in the spirals of language itself.

One might describe this source of reluctance in line with *Freyasfire*, as being the “chameleon like and labyrinthine natures of the works in question,” works of fiction which splinter genre names and categories, and which, as a result, are perhaps more nobly left unclassified by their admirers. In this case, weird fiction could be taken as constituting an

anomaly of genre, possessing an aberrational quality which is unassimilable to categories, naming and theorisation, and consequently presenting an impediment to further discussion. However, the point is that the discussion does continue, in spite (or perhaps because) of this aporia. Adjectives like “labyrinthine” are themselves qualifications of any perceived unnameability, a result of the need to name not weird fiction itself, but the “weird-ness” of weird fiction, and thereby to account for the name’s appeal and longevity. Thus, for me, what stands as being emblematic of the weird in general is that *The Nightmare Network’s* discussion doesn’t end on a note of bewilderment, that *Freyasfire* utters “Still,” as if to say this is still worth talking about, before repeating *symbolique’s* call for a recommended reading list. In my view, the weird is what inhabits this discussion’s double movement, to name and not to name—to share, discuss and speculate on the one hand, while on the other to retain a certain silence, recuperating the original mystery. To discuss weird fiction is, in other words, to *name the unnameable*.

Consequently, as much as my thesis is informed by a taxonomic sensitivity, an awareness that too zealous an attempt at naming “weird fiction” might despoil its enigma, it also aspires to a certain feistiness where names are concerned. In discussing the politics of the weird-as-genre, writer M. John Harrison averred that “to name yourself” as an author writing in a genre, “is to take responsibility for your ideas. ... It’s up to us, as individuals and as sharers of some labelled or unlabelled umbrella, to make ourselves as strong and feisty as possible” (*The New Weird* 329). While Harrison’s call to arms was addressed to his fellow science fiction and fantasy writers, I would argue that this ethic of “tak[ing] responsibility for your ideas” through genre-naming extends equally to literary criticism. Naming genres, or, rather, engaging in the dialogic transaction of naming that surrounds genres, is necessary if the critic is to foster both interpretive clarity and an ethical integrity. Joshi’s reluctance to define “weird fiction” in a book entitled *The Weird Tale* seems to me borne of a similar

failure to take responsibility, a refusal to get one's hands dirty at the coal-face, so to speak. Ignoring the call to partake in the name game not only stymies critical debate, but also overlooks the stakes the critic has in the business of genres, and particularly the business of genre ownership and the intellectual capital such ownership generates. As Harrison goes on to add, "the struggle to name is the struggle to own" (323). In my opinion, the critic, like the writer, has a responsibility to intervene in debates regarding genre names and labels, to challenge them and also to posit alternatives that reframe existing terminologies in ways counter to prevailing trends. Refusing to engage in this transaction is not, I would argue, a noble avoidance of genre-as-capital, but, as Heath says, to take the full significance of genres "for granted."

My project's will-to-name is also informed by weird fiction's rhetoric and formal structures—to quote genre theorist John Frow, the structures via which "genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood" (2). One of the primary reality effects of weird fiction is a seemingly paradoxical movement in language, a speech act that in itself exemplifies weird fiction's own anomalous status as a genre: *naming the unnameable*. Weird fiction not only plays out its terminological enigmas at the level of narrative; it also reflects critically on how language produces, or fails to produce, understanding of the world. While in the world beyond the text, naming the unnameable is little more than a disconcerting paradox, in weird fiction it suggests something forbidden, a metonym for the breakdown of rules and meaning, and a chaos subsisting not only behind words, but at their very roots.

What emerges from this metonymy is a kind of horror through language, a lexicon of the dark fantastic whereby language—the way its words are used to reflect reality and meaning—becomes the chief locus of fear. Throughout weird fiction narratives, what seems constantly at stake is the integrity of language, a sense that the written or spoken word might

betray its human users, abandoning them to chaos rather than protecting them from it. Weird fiction engages explicitly with the rules of oral and written discourse, as well as the processes of writing and reading that are encoded by such rules, in order to make language itself a thematic object within its continuum of horror. Through the reiterative use of such motifs as the monstrous library, and the malignly sentient book or grimoire, weird fiction demonstrates a near obsessive interest in the way language contravenes its own rules while generating new and often terrifying ones in the process. The weird frequently engages in a process of self-theorisation with respect to its own use of language, testing the limits of language systems and rules by introducing its own counter-systems, and thereby tugging at the threads of signification that divide the real from the unreal. Consequently, much weird fiction acts as a diegetic mirror to the non-diegetic world in which names and language are constantly taken for granted. What, in the world external to the text, is simply an issue of proper names, taxonomies, and their popular legitimacy becomes, within the weird fiction text, a code of the arcane, a ritual through which a horrific semiosis is unpacked and explored.

In this respect, weird fiction is self-reflexive horror *nonpareil*. It concerns itself not only with how the unnameable might be named and spoken, but how such failures of language's descriptive function can generate a sensation of dread, and reflect this dread back again at the level of language itself. As much as this thesis is concerned with weird fiction's deployment of written and spoken language, it is also interested in the way in which the weird explores the gaps within language, and the fissures where only an awed silence is possible. Weird fiction often theorises the limits of language, the point at which words fail to mean, but where language intrudes into the unspeakable territory of sensation. In these cases, the unspeakable itself becomes paradoxically "speakable," an affect accompanied by a dialect, with its figures, games, and performances.

This sensitivity to affect and to languages of affect arguably corroborates one of the earliest definitions of weird fiction. While one of my goals with this project is to move weird fiction away from the confines of Lovecraft scholarship, and away from the larger domain of biographical study in general, Lovecraft's definition of the weird in his 1927 essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" remains among the most persuasive, for me, due to its foregrounding of sensitivity. Altogether, he uses the word "sensitive" eleven times in the paper, correlating it with what he calls "*a subtle attitude of awed listening*" that must be induced from the reader as "[t]he one test of the really weird" (427). In order to elicit the desired listening response from its readers, weird fiction itself listens, listens to language and its high inaudible timbres in order to project them into something infinitely perplexing. Whether or not this sensibility makes the weird a genre, however, remains to be seen.

\* \* \*

The question of whether it is useful to continue discussing weird fiction within the confines of genre theory, and not according to a more open-ended theoretical paradigm, forms the point of departure for my opening chapter. While I am more sympathetic to the idea of the weird as denoting a modal or tonal quality of literature and writing rather than signifying anything generically marketable, I am also sceptical of approaches which shy away from engaging with the processes of genre altogether. It is the discussion prompted by the possibility of weird fiction as genre, and the attempt to name those generic aspects which seem to link texts across time, which cultivates the ground for more open-ended, modal approaches to understanding it.

Consequently, the beginning of chapter one is devoted to a critique of prominent weird fiction and Lovecraft scholar S. T. Joshi, who in my view attempts to sidestep the

discussion of weird fiction's potential genre status by foregrounding the figure of the author. For Joshi, biography and authorial intention form the primary nodes for assessing the worth of weird fiction, a move that not only establishes a false literary meritocracy for the weird, but also diverts discussion away from its textual patterns and modes of rhetoric. I argue that over-emphasis on authorial intention inhibits any real discussion of what constitutes the weird-ness of weird texts. This is due to the fact that the diegetic worlds of the weird are, for the biographical scholar, reducible to ciphers for the world-view of the author. Such an approach creates an artificial solipsism, denying weird fiction texts the benefit of diachronic analysis, except as anything other than objects of influence.

Contrary to this attitude, which has too often stymied debate in weird fiction circles of criticism, I argue that weird fiction engages with the idea of world and world-view in a different sense; in terms of a failure of language to make worlds cohere diegetically into narratives that can be rendered sensible. This view is informed by contemporary attitudes to the weird, and in particular the perspectives averred by many of its writers, including China Miéville, Thomas Ligotti, and Michael Cisco, all of whom see weird fiction in terms of a strategic collapsing of the world as a human concept that can be dealt with in human terms.

I correlate the voices of present day writers with Fredric Jameson's 1975 study of romantic fantasy, and in particular his gloss on Heidegger to explain how the worlds of genre texts reveal their occulted phenomenologies. Revisiting Heidegger's discussion of how being in the world (*Dasein*) is always accompanied by a terrifying absence of meaning (*Angst*), I interpret Jameson's genre study as an aide for exploring how weird fiction diegetically maps a world bereft of the codes of signification we attach to it via language. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of John Frow's distinction between genre and mode, and the question of where weird fiction sits in relation to both.

I have already alluded to the importance of naming the unnameable as a speech act or movement that metonymises the breakdown of meaning in weird fiction. In chapter two, I treat naming the unnameable as the prototypical weird speech act, a semiotic double-take in the face of a thing or an event that defies description, and whose ubiquity can be observed at levels of weird narrative other than as a simple statement of failure (*I cannot describe the thing that was before me*, etc.). The weird speech act is not simply a failure of language to supply the correct frame or signifier for an unspeakable referent: it also constitutes something positive, a stretching of language's limits in the goal of reaching beyond one-dimensional description. I demonstrate how the consequence of transgressing such limits is shown to be a heightening of language's potential for self-reflexivity. The weird speech act detaches itself from its object or referent in the very moment of being uttered, circling moebian-like around the sense-making rules of its own enunciation, and in a way becoming the very unspeakable thing to which its words fail to adhere.

In providing examples of weird fiction's primary speech act from throughout its history, I will also be discussing some of the analogic idioms of unspeakability that weird fiction utilises from outside literature. In particular, I will pay attention to the concept of the numinous or ineffable in theology as discussed by William James and Rudolf Otto, and the language of the sublime in Kantian aesthetics as noted by Jean-Francois Lyotard. Elements of both the ineffable and the sublime infect the weird speech act; both ideas approach an intensity whose power exceeds human cognition, but which nonetheless rely on a language of illustrative substitution which has its roots in the cognitive. However, I argue that the weird speech act goes further than its conceptual analogues in eschewing the idea of substitution for an extra-linguistic referent altogether. Naming the unnameable is enacted entirely through the force of its own enigmatic pronouncement, through the grammar of an unspeakable semiosis that admits of nothing beyond its own performance. As such, it



requires a theoretical paradigm foregrounding performativity in order to make sense of it. The larger part of chapter two is thus an engagement with the weird speech act in the terms set about by J. L. Austin's influential theory of speech act performativity. Austin treats descriptive language in opposition to the force of a self-performing utterance—a speech act, in other words, that enacts itself independently of anything external to it. Despite this seemingly perfect fit, the weird speech act problematizes certain aspects of Austin's theory, and in particular the seemingly self-evident transition from locution (the meaningful content of an utterance) to illocution (its force or performativity). I conclude my discussion of the weird speech act by looking at Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of *periperformativity*, a special kind of performative speech act that takes place laterally, outside the immediate context of speech rather than directly within it.

In chapter three I move from the weird speech act to a discussion of textually inscribed spaces in weird fiction, and specifically the site of the library. Traditionally, the library has been thought of as a simulacrum for a comfortable and accessible human world, a representational locus which reflects back a schema of total knowledge ready to hand. Weird fiction's interest in the destabilisation of such homely schemas means that the library assumes an entirely different set of values and functions. Characters who encounter libraries in weird fiction are initially entranced by what they perceive as a threshold to enlightenment, or at least an affirmation of their readerly authority in whatever world-context the library appears. However, this trust in the library as a stanchion of authority is proven in weird tales to be unfounded. Libraries in the weird are shown to contain their own hidden orders, which are always inaccessible, and even inimical to the human search for meaning. In this way, the weird library inverts the metaphor humans typically project onto it, making it stand instead for the failure of such representational worlds to mean in the way we intend. My discussion of the weird library utilises Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the

*chronotope*—a narrative time-space which reflects critically on its counterpart in reality—to elucidate the site’s valences of discourse, the idealism of the library as a project, but also its inevitable and catastrophic failure. In particular, I will be paying attention to the way weird fiction’s library demonstrates its own kind of dialogism as a chronotope, oscillating from centripetal meaning to centrifugal non-meaning, and back again. The two stories I will be focussing on—Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Library of Babel” (1962), and Mark Samuels’s “A Contaminated Text” (2010)—exemplify this threefold dialogic exchange. Not only do they both dramatize, via the library, human conceptions of worlds centrifugally collapsing in on themselves, they also explore the potential for the library to facilitate a newly monstrous centripetal coherence, a truth which bars human access to its centre.

Chapter four forms the first of a two-chapter arc on affect and language in the weird. I begin with a critique of China Miéville’s non-fiction work, much of which is devoted to staking out a poetics for weird fiction. While Miéville can be credited as the first person to openly state the link between weird fiction and affect (in his 2008 essay “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire”)—and on the genre’s evolution of a language of affect to convey unnameable encounters or states of being—I argue that he misrepresents the nature of said affect via an unnecessary opposition: that between weird fiction and hauntological fiction. My argument in chapter four offers a contrary view, that the study of hauntology advocated for and theorised by Jacques Derrida forms an ideal paradigm for the analysis of weird affect in all its forms. Specifically, Derrida’s hauntological conception of the “non-present present” accurately describes a temporality of weird affect, a shadow out of (present) time from which an “It” without essence or name looks back at us (*Specters of Marx* 6).

In elucidating the idea of an affectual language of the weird via haunting and hauntology, I will look closely at two stories which develop their own idiom of such a language, but which nonetheless depict haunting in terms of an affective contraction and

retraction. H. P. Lovecraft's early tale "The Outsider" (1926) portrays haunting in terms of a mis-en-abyme of self, a stretching of a pliable subjectivity across multiple affective planes: inside and outside, remembering and forgetting, recognition and misrecognition. In Thomas Ligotti's "The Red Tower" (1996), affectual solipsism is replaced by the breadth of an intensive battleground, a killing field in which two kinds of unpeopled space wage a war of affect in the shadow of an apocalypse that never comes. In both stories, place, space, person, and personality lose their contours, becoming haunting gradations of intensity in a larger encounter. The valences of these encounters osmotically colour the language of the stories; to read them is thus to partake in a supplementary sharing of their affect.

In chapter six, the final chapter of the thesis, I approach the subject of weird affect from another angle: its kinship to Brian Massumi's theory of "threat affect," discussed in his 2010 essay "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact." Massumi's notion of an affective field which self-renews, increasing in intensity the more nebulously unknown its potential becomes, forms an analogue for the way sensations of dread in weird fiction often outlast their narratives. In dramatizing the sense of an unknown future, with worse things waiting on the edge of an ever-receding horizon, weird tales often resemble fables of threat. Such narratives grant threat affect a body and an intensive force, a capacity to act and be reacted to even when they are physically absent from the scene. Like Lovecraft's Cthulhu, threat never appears as such, never finalises itself in a cataclysmic event whose magnitude could be mapped. Rather, it persists affectually as a presentiment, a residual fear that cannot be dispersed, and which sustains itself in the language and fearful speculations of the affected ("What next?")

I explore how threat affect defers itself in the language of weird tales by examining two stories in detail: Edgar Allan Poe's "Shadow: A Parable" (1835) and Lovecraft's seminal tale "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928). Both stories chart the peregrinations of threat

affect as it rises gradually in intensity, generating a surplus of fearful dread that propels each story towards a conclusion without answers. In each case, the designations of “Shadow” and “Cthulhu” lose their sense of external reference, becoming ciphers for something indeterminate but ineluctably menacing, a threat that directs action and reaction but never shows its true nature directly. Further, threat affect is shown to be performative in character: in both stories, the speech of characters becomes an unwitting carrier for the continuance of threat, allowing it to survive and renew itself via dialogue.

I conclude the chapter on a note of hope for at least a partial release from threat’s implacable cycle. Specifically, I examine the potential for human characters to alter the affective tenor of the encounter with threat, and to generate their own intensive responses to it in a way that provides consolation. In analysing forms of defiance to threat affect in the weird, I pay particular attention to Caitlin R. Kiernan’s “Andromeda Among the Stones” (2003). Kiernan’s tale is perhaps unique in presenting a sustained and deliberate counter-performance to threat affect in human terms, changing the character of threat’s deferral in speech to stand for memorial rather than dread. Memory and memorialisation become performative gestures that mitigate threat by accepting its reality rather than denying it, making it a monument to the departed—the human victims of threat’s deferral in the past—distilled in the speech of those still living in its shadow (“This is where I stand”) (Kiernan 25).

Above all, my thesis represents an engagement with a little discussed area of research for weird fiction studies: the way in which the weird’s horror poetics is, at least partially, a nightmare of semiotics. In self-theorising its own relationship to language, text, and discourse, weird fiction uses its genre, and the tropes of its genre, to interrogate how such structures of meaning are used in the service of constructing human narratives of world and world-ness. The fact that such narrativizing attempts are carried out in a world that, in

its naked reality, is not conducive to any form of life-affirming story-telling provides the basis for the horror of the weird. In annulling the pretence of human narrative frameworks for the world, weird fiction makes the horror of incoherence the chief problematic at the heart of its narratology.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Weirding the World, Defining the Field**

Perhaps the most important question to begin a genre analysis of weird fiction is: why *weird*? Why does “weird” seem to fit the attitude of the fiction to such an extent that it has survived countless upheavals of style and publication, remaining relevant to its readers even while lacking nearly all visibility on the shelves of book stores? Both the Oxford English Dictionary and the Online Etymology Dictionary define its root in Old English (“wyrd”), via Proto-Germanic (“wurthiz”), as “having the power to control fate,” as well as “fate,” “chance” “fortune” and the supernatural more generally. While “weird” as an adjective is familiar to most people, invoking among other things the image of the Weird Sisters (Shakespeare’s controllers of fate in *Macbeth*), the idea of “weird” as a noun retains something of the alien and the unfamiliar even today. The ‘thing-ness’ of the weird, that it has the potential to be both subject and object for verbs, represents the first step in approaching it as a *process*. By process, I mean that the weird occurs, takes place; never in stasis, it moves, turns, and transforms, exposing ephemeral boundaries and staking out new territories beyond them. The notion of “weird” as processual is supported by the word’s derivation. Etymologically speaking, one of the less explored avenues for defining “weird” is its root in the Proto-Indo-European “wert” (“to turn, to wind”), the source also of the Old English *weorðan* (“to become”). As I will demonstrate, one of the most recognisably generic

features of weird fiction is the way it applies such processual becomings to the world; not just the worlds of its texts, but to the extra-diegetic world as well—in Adorno and Horkheimer’s words, the “all-powerful total concept of all that we [as humans] project into it” (190). Simply put, *the weird weirds the world*, and all narratives of world-ness that it brushes up against.

Nonetheless, the question of whether weird fiction can be accurately labelled as a genre, as a manner of framing texts which means the same thing to everyone, remains open to discussion. While “weird” may denote a raft of meanings to those familiar with its etymology, this does not equate to a corresponding level of comprehension from the literary marketplace. In this sense, my own ambivalence regarding the weird’s genre status is far from an original caveat. In fact, it is the result of a long inheritance; genre criticism has tended to downplay the term “weird” because of its perceived failure to pass into widespread generic usage. The fact that its greatest period of popular legitimacy is tied to the pulp scene of nineteen-thirties America, and the flagship magazine *Weird Tales* in particular, has not helped matters, with confusion arising as to whether it is more accurately thought of as a method of publication rather than a genre as such. Moreover, the cultural currency of “weird” is vastly outscored by that of the terms adjacent to it, including “horror,” “fantasy,” and even “gothic,” all of which have a sizable pedigree in the genre marketplace. How can the weird be defined as a genre if it lacks a definable industry standard, so much so that the reading public fail to respond to it as, in Frow’s terms, a “horizon of expectation” (69)?

### Theoretical or Anti-Theoretical?: A Critique of S. T. Joshi

Weird fiction’s tenuous place in genre criticism is visible even in the work of S. T. Joshi, one of the longest supporters of the classification’s legitimacy. To the extent that Joshi

almost singlehandedly rescued the term “weird fiction” from literary oblivion, he has been an invaluable, and unavoidable, influence on this thesis. In particular, his appeal for heuristic specificity for the term “weird,” and its distinction from other modes of the horrific or fantastic, represents a watershed moment in the history of speculative fiction’s genre cartography. In *The Weird Tale* from 1990, Joshi notes the “irremediable confusion” of the weird with “terms such as horror, terror, fantasy, the fantastic, ghost story, Gothic fiction, and others,” a false conflation which, he argues, has unnecessarily sidelined serious scholarly research into the weird as a speculative mode with its own tropes, devices, and strategies (2). Joshi goes on to criticise David Punter’s “tortuous effort” to locate Lovecraft within a second-hand tradition of Gothic fiction, arguing that the “term [Gothic] is bandied about so casually and haphazardly in critical and publishing circles that it becomes very awkward to use it for anything but the Gothic novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (*The Weird Tale* 3). While I would hesitate in dismissing the idea of a historical or thematic link between the weird and the Gothic, Joshi can be commended for being among the first to chastise speculative fiction criticism’s history of lazy confluations.

Despite the historical importance of this early work, many of Joshi’s interventions in the weird-fiction-as-genre debate have themselves had a counter-productive effect on how knowledge of the term has evolved. In particular, the intersection of Joshi’s work on weird fiction with his abiding critical interest in H. P. Lovecraft has, arguably, been at least as confusing to any understanding of the weird long-term as any fatuous conflation of the weird and the gothic. Indeed, one of the major problems afflicting Joshi’s genre work relates to a misconstruing of how genres actually function, and, in particular, a mis-framing of the weird as an effect of authorship. I do not intend to provide a comprehensive overview of Joshi’s vast bibliography within this thesis. Instead, I will present a short summary of two of his texts that deal explicitly with weird fiction, specifically the works *The Weird Tale*

(1990), and *The Modern Weird Tale* (2001). Enumerating some of the pros and cons of his research here will, it is hoped, cast light on my own research pathway.

Of these two texts, *The Weird Tale* is undoubtedly the more theoretically ambitious. The book's introduction exemplifies Joshi's fraught relationship with genre theory, beginning as it does with the assertion that the early weird tale "did not ... exist as a genre but as *the consequence of a world view*" (*The Weird Tale* 1; original emphasis). Such a claim seems contradictory, given that "world view" suggests an affirmation rather than a denial of the weird as genre. From at least as early as 1975, when Fredric Jameson described nineteenth century romance as a genre or mode "in which the *world-ness* of *world* reveals itself" (142; original emphasis), to Frow's 2005 definition of the genre text as "a schematic world, a limited piece of reality, which is sketched in outline and carved out from a larger continuum" (7), we have been used to thinking of literary genres in terms of worlds and world views. While Joshi is clearly referring to the historically contingent world views of individual authors, such extra-diegetic perspectives frequently exist in dialogue with their counterparts in fiction. What can be salvaged from Joshi's assertion is, perhaps, a sense of the world-ness of the weird—not only does it fashion a world with laws and meanings, it is also *about* world-ness, about the arbitrary, too-easily-broken laws and meanings we ascribe to the world through language and other means. This sense of the weird's focus on philosophical rumination, the idea that its narratives speculate on the structures of the extra-diegetic world through their own diegetic analogues, informs Joshi's most persuasive argument in the book:

[t]he weird tale offers unique opportunities for philosophical speculation—it could be said that the weird tale is an inherently philosophical mode in that it frequently compels us to address directly such fundamental issues as the nature of the universe and our place in it. (*The Weird Tale* 11)



That the weird is connected to both a world view and a philosophy is indisputable. To Joshi's point, I would add that, as much as the weird exemplifies a view of the real world, an attitude reflected in the schematic worlds of its narratives, it also represents a negation of "world" as a viable concept. By the same token, as much as it is accompanied by a philosophy, it also presents a *non*-philosophy, or the voiding of all philosophies of world in general. I elaborate more on what I mean by this later in this thesis. Here it suffices to say that the weird offers a mode of philosophical inquiry that is marked by irresolution—it seeks to create, elucidate, and extend problems rather than posit answers to them. If the weird is a philosophy, it is a philosophy that devours its own traces, leaving behind only confusion and unease.

The problems with Joshi's thesis in *The Weird Tale* stem not from his idea of the weird "as *the consequence of a world view*" but, rather, from where he chooses to take this assertion. For Joshi, "world view" means agency and intention, not the instructions for reading and response accompanying the schematic world of genre. What is revealed late in the introduction is that *The Weird Tale* is less of a genre study than it is the study of several weird fiction authors, namely the five that Joshi considers the most important to the form's development since Edgar Allan Poe: Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, M. R. James, Ambrose Bierce, Lord Dunsany, and Lovecraft. The weird, he clarifies, is the consequence of not one but several world views, held by several different writers who can be coherently lassoed together under the rubric of "weird fiction." Placing the selected authors' philosophies and beliefs ahead of the genre itself will, he argues, furnish the weird with a greater manifesto than any study of the fiction on its own could accomplish:

weird writers utilize the schemas I have outlined (or various permutations of them) *precisely in accordance with their philosophical predispositions*. ... All the authors I study here ... evolved distinctive world views, and it was those world views that led them to write the sort

of literature they did. I am convinced that we can understand these writers' work—the whole of their work, not merely their purportedly 'weird' writing—only by examining their metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic theories. In every case we shall see that each writer's entire output is a philosophical unity, changing as the author's conception of the world changes. (*The Weird Tale* 10-11; original emphasis)

Joshi's assertions here are marked by a curious disconnect between the ostensible goal of his study—to arrive at an adequate definition for the "weird tale," one that would distinguish it from other labels in the speculative fiction field—and his proposed methodology. That is, he appears to wish to have it both ways, discussing the weird as both a genre—a goal earmarked in the very title of the book—and as a loose affiliation of likeminded writers. However, his aspirations toward genre specificity are hamstrung by an overriding loyalty to authorial intention, towards the so-called "metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic" unities of perspective belonging to his chosen authors. The most one can say about the weird as genre, according to such an approach, is that it constitutes a pattern of influence, in which supernatural motifs come to stand for the subjective cosmologies of the authors who use them. In Joshi's opinion, the "world view" of the weird is reducible to a mindset, a historically localised frame of reference which occasionally overlaps with other frames and world views, but which is always a sovereign "unity" in itself.

While contextual or biographical scholarship certainly has its place, genre studies of any kind benefit little from such an approach. One of our inheritances from New Criticism has been a distrust of any conflation of the two modes of reading text, an understanding that the reconstruction of an author from one epoch is in no way reducible to the formulation of genre tropes over several epochs. Arguing for literature as an expression of biography makes the meaning of genre become ever more slippery, assigning it to its proper place as a historical artefact while ignoring its changeability over time.

Even leaving aside the intentionalist fallacy, Joshi's reluctance to take the conversation of genre beyond the confines of authorship signifies an avoidance of literary theory's interventions. He is honest about this, admitting in the opening sentence of *The Weird Tale* that his own views "have gradually evolved toward a consciously antitheoretical position" (xi). However, more problematic than this "conscious evolution" away from theory is his description, later in the book, of "recent critical work (not merely in this field but in most others)" as "cheerless, mechanical, and obfuscatory" (*The Weird Tale* xii). There is more than a suggestion here of distrust for the textual indeterminacies directing certain postmodern and post-structuralist criticism. One can imagine Joshi at odds with the dominant critical paradigms of 1990, *The Weird Tale's* year of publication, a time when the impact of post-structuralist doyens like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida was evident, and where the shift away from work and biography to text and textuality was being taken in ever more labyrinthine directions. Joshi is content to justify his refusal to go down the post-structuralist rabbit-hole by appealing to the reader. He argues that an approach too theory-driven risks the reader being "repelled rather than attracted to the subjects of study," while apologetically expressing a "hope" that "my work does not have an analogous effect" (*The Weird Tale* xii). Palpable here is the anxiety of the biographer, the fear that his efforts at reconstructing an authorial reality might be thwarted by something unreadable within the text itself.

Given Joshi's disinclination for using theory, it is perhaps unsurprising that he defers the question of genre, asserting late in the book's introduction that the "implications for genre [and the weird] are left to later study" (*The Weird Tale* 11). However, he is at least happy to refute the viability of any of the terms proposed by others, arguing that the "irremediable confusion of terms such as horror, terror, the supernatural, fantasy, the fantastic, ghost story, Gothic fiction" has meant that "no definition of the weird tale

embraces types of works that can plausibly be assumed to enter into the scope of the term” (2). It is this squeamishness towards the practice of genre-naming, accompanied by a dismissal of previous attempts to name, which makes Joshi’s work most problematic. Critics who wish to discuss a putative genre always have their own vested interest in how the genre in question is viewed, and the lexicon of descriptive terms for the genre to which they pay an indirect fealty. In distancing himself from the art of labelling altogether, Joshi risks trading off the taxonomic efforts of others while adopting an attitude of aloofness to the discourse framing taxonomical debates.

This refusal to enter the discursive fray is troubling enough, but is compounded further in *The Modern Weird Tale*. The book re-treads its predecessor’s methodology, with biographical memoranda and isolated textual analysis applied to further authors who are granted more worthy of study than others. Added to the mix this time however is a more obvious attitude of literary value judgment. The book’s introduction takes as its basis the proliferation of weird and horror fiction “since Lovecraft’s time,” and specifically a perceived lapse in quality writing as a result of the genre’s mass marketability. “[I]t is not at all clear that much of this mass of writing has any literary significance or much chance of survival,” notes Joshi, before describing what he sees as “a consensus among informed critics that the amount of meritorious weird fiction being written today is in exactly inverse proportion to its quality” (*The Modern Weird Tale* 1). Authors, the “world views” of whom formerly constituted Joshi’s basis for classifying the weird, are now perceived as messy and shallow creatures, whose diversity of styles and perspectives makes the critic’s task of classifying them all the more difficult. “It seems as if weird authors will simply continue to produce whatever they are moved to produce at the moment,” he laments, “and it is we critics who have the onerous task of tidying up after them and classifying their work in this or that subcategory” (*The Modern Weird Tale* 11).

It is clear that Joshi has by this time adopted the role of gate-keeper in a weird fiction meritocracy based on his own personal tastes. Overall, genre seems to have become the enemy, a messily protean bastardizing of a literary golden age, with commercialism reducing the weird “world view” to an artless parody of its earlier form. The consequence of this is that Joshi is forced to avoid any attempt to mount a serious genre study in the book, and instead argue, ironically, for the genre’s dissolution. In a vitriolic passage, the regeneration of the weird as an art form is explicitly associated with its decline in readership, a decline Joshi apparently wishes to hasten:

if the ‘death of horror’ means nothing more than that the legions of second-rate hacks will cease flooding the market with their vapid and slipshod products, then weird fiction may well emerge purged and cleansed and will continue to supply its small modicum of genuine literature to a discriminating readership. (*The Modern Weird Tale* 3)

As reactionary as it might be, Joshi’s point here retrospectively reveals much of the unspoken prejudice governing *The Weird Tale*’s main argument. His genre-phobia reveals itself to be a side-effect of devotion to a given author, namely Lovecraft. Joshi’s earlier statements “I use the term ‘weird tale’ more or less as Lovecraft did,” and “Lovecraft may be still the most acute theoretician of the weird tale” can, in hindsight, be taken to prefigure his genre-phobia (*The Weird Tale* 2). They can also be taken as emblematic of the unfortunate absorption of much weird fiction scholarship by Lovecraft biographical research throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties. The many critical magazines and publications of this period—including the Joshi-helmed *Lovecraft Studies* (1979-1993), *Studies in Weird Fiction* (1987-1993), and *Crypt of Cthulhu* (1984)—can, when viewed as a subset of Lovecraft fandom, be held as much responsible for the “‘ghettoization’ of weird fiction” as any of the pulps from the nineteen-twenties and thirties (*The Modern Weird Tale* 4). The entry of weird fiction genre studies into the mainstream of scholarly writing requires

that it first shed the millstone of Lovecraft biographizing, a research cul-de-sac that has, among other things, led to an over-obsession with Lovecraft's racism and eurocentrism. While these are important and undeniable aspects of his worldview—and, by extension, his writing—their monumentalism often distracts from research into other areas of his work, notably the way Lovecraft's use of language upholds but also subverts his ideological intentions.

Needless to say, my own experience with theory has been anything but “cheerless, mechanical, and obfuscatory” (*The Weird Tale* xii). On the contrary, my methodology treats weird texts as being, in themselves, highly self-theorising, allowing for the application of diverse theoretical strategies in their interpretation. My utilization of post-structuralist criticism throughout this thesis arises from a conviction that runs counter to Joshi's opposition to theory: that to read weird fiction as a critique of the structures of knowledge that both produce and contain it is to read with the grain of the weird text, not against it. In other words, the perplexing conceptions of post-structuralism make it a useful paradigm for studying the weird because the weird itself constitutes its own highly self-theorising paradigm. If the weird represents a world view then, such a world view is the result of a critical interest in the incoherence of all world views, not with the partial coherence of authorial perspectives noted by Joshi. Weird fictions illustrate a narratological pattern of response, not to the world or context of an individual author, but to the problems inherent in the very idea of a sensible, determinate world, at any time.

While this contention certainly presents challenges for assigning a meaning and a value to weird fiction as a genre, it at least moves closer to an understanding of where the weird stands in relation to the question of genre as world view. Any genre study of the weird must endeavour to understand not only how conceptions of indeterminacy have changed over time, but also how speech patterns and modes of utterance have changed in order to

recast the problem of indeterminacy. In opposition to Joshi's approach to dealing with the weird as a hierarchy of works with authors and contexts, I would argue that a more apposite method of studying weird fiction is to conceive it in terms of *text*. As much as the weird can be discussed within the interpretive frame of genre as a "horizon of expectation," it also signifies a horizon of textual interrogation, a testing out of the limits whereby language and text become readable. Consequently, the weird can be viewed according to what Roland Barthes terms as a "methodological field," not a corpus of works, but

*a process of demonstration, [which] speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse ... the text is not the decomposition of the work, it is the work that is the imaginary tail of the Text; or again, the Text is experienced only in an activity of production.* ("From Work to Text" 157; original emphasis)

Insofar as it designates a way of telling a story about the world, the weird is both a "process" and an "activity" devoted to the "production" and "demonstration" of a problem in language. The problem is that of limit and representation, an epistemological dilemma over the limits of understanding the world, but also a semiotic problem over how to articulate those limits, to transgress them or uphold them according to the representational circuits of narrative. The weird is a nonpareil manifestation of Barthesian textuality in that it unpacks the very thing which Barthes describes as being implicit to text in general, an "experience of limits" and a venturing toward "the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.)" ("From Work to Text" 157). Not only is weird fiction an engagement with the edge of representational possibilities, but it also thematises those possibilities, making them both object and symbol for a more universal problematic.

Against World, Against Narrative: Contemporary Approaches to the Weird

In spite of where he took the idea, Joshi's designation of the weird as "*the consequence of a world view*" remains interesting because it emphasizes the concept of "world." Here, I would like to suggest an addendum to the concept of weird-as-world. Less characteristic of any world view, any representational image of the world with its own laws and philosophical conceits, weird fiction maintains an opposition to the principle ideologies of world-building in fantasy. Elements of magic, the supernatural, or the fantastic in weird fiction are geared towards demonstrating a lack of any plan to its worlds, not to providing a narrative means for the reader to navigate those worlds vertically as in a guidebook. In weird fiction, the world is an enigma concealing an abyss; any attempt by a reader to navigate weird fiction's world leads to the intensification of this enigma, and a corresponding increase in the depth of the abyss. Consequently, as well as being anti-world in temperament, the weird is also anti-narrative in principle. The fictional worlds of weird fiction manifest a kind of meta-knowledge about their real-world counterparts; its narratives work to negate grand narratives, the interpretative templates which allow us to make sense of the extra-diegetic world beyond the text.

In as much as it possesses generically recognisable qualities that can be marketed as such, weird fiction also demonstrates a range of high literary conceits that are anything but generic. Gelder has noted that *Weird Tales*, the long-running flagship magazine of weird fiction in the popular press, "represent[ed] its content not in the conventional terms of popular fiction (e.g. as entertainment), however, but as a form of art; that is, it defines itself through a discourse more commonly available to literature (83). Indeed, weird fiction's worldview chimes more with the literatures of modernism rather than the genres of fantasy in reflecting the indeterminate nature of our own world. Its manifesto also shares much in common with the Breton school of Surrealism and its new mythology of the *Great Transparent Ones*, omnipotent avatars of desire who reveal themselves "at times of



rupture,” and in alienated response to which “[m]an, powerless to their actions, can only stand by and watch them enact their will” (Adams 70; 71). However, the weird doesn’t reflect indeterminacy in any didactic way. That is, it doesn’t anachronistically gesture to a more meaningful time in the past, or to a possible pathway for regeneration and social change in the future. Rather, the weird fixates on the sometimes beautiful, often horrifying, splendours of enigma itself. In this way, the weird is among the most ecstatically metaphysical forms of the fantastic: it does not seek to solve the problems it creates, but to augment the beauty and terror derived from the failure of all possible solutions to the problem of the world.

It is exactly this property, the negation of worlds and narrative plans of worlds that has been the subject of much of the renewed interest in weird fiction over the last ten years. In an interview with weird fiction author Michael Cisco for the online journal *Postscripts to Darkness*, Sean Moreland notes that such “fictions draw readers along a line of flight which, as they continue reading, carries them ever-further from any recognizable system of laws, rules, equivalences, and so on” (n.p.). Cisco affirms Moreland’s observation, adding that such haphazard or non-existent world-design is an effect of plausibility in the weird:

We don’t get to see the plans of our world, which actually has no plan anyway. So making a plausible world means actually not planning it or planning in such a way that there are many plans, many ideas of the world, just as it is on Earth. (n.p.)

Extrapolating from Cisco, it could be argued that supernatural tropes in weird fiction are not designed to make visible the mechanics of a super-mundane world, as they are in more romantic genres of the fantastic, but contribute instead to further obscuring those mechanics. Despite taking for granted the absence of a plan however, the weird is never passive in relation to this problem. On the contrary, it exhibits a fascination for its own irresolvable paradoxes, and an obsessive tendency to magnify every aspect of the failure to gain access

to any grand scheme. In other words, weird fiction constitutes a pattern of narrative insofar as it is committed to the annihilation of the patterns and hermeneutic strategies by which we make sense of narratives.

Many contemporary theorists of weird fiction have endeavoured to understand it as both a self-theorising and perplexing genre: a method for expounding on the horrors, but also the beauties, of indeterminacy itself. In their seminal anthology from 2014, *The Weird*, Ann and Jeff Vandermeer argue that the weird “represents the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane,” whose tales “remain universal because they entertain while also expressing our own dissatisfaction with, and uncertainty about, reality” (xv). The weird entertains, the Vandermeers continue, because its narratives aren’t silently resigned to such dissatisfaction, nor glumly solipsistic in their responses to it. Rather, weird fictions “embrace the inexplicable” on its own terms, constructing their own myriad rhetorics for the world’s mysteries instead of simply replacing them within a known epistemological binary (i.e. natural/supernatural).

For the Vandermeers, failure to understand the world via the frame of any grand narrative is a positive feature in weird fiction; it “acknowledges failure as sign and symbol of our limitations,” while nonetheless “striv[ing] for a kind of understanding even when something cannot be understood” (xv). The point that failure exemplifies both a semiotic and a symbolic act in the weird is especially crucial to my thesis. Throughout, I pay particular attention to the way failure—failure to speak, failure to understand, failure to put knowledge into action and use words in the way intended—forms part of a grammar of performativity in weird fiction. The narrative of my thesis is signposted according to various aspects of weird fiction’s positive failure. The way failure and limit are harnessed forms my overarching concern at all times; I demonstrate that failure possesses its own dynamism,

allowing it to mark out territories of representation and affect falling beyond the bounds of the nameable.

The critic who has contributed most to my understanding of and analytical approach to the weird is arguably not a critic at all, but primarily a writer of the fantastic himself. Over the course of three relatively short critical tracts—an anthology afterword, a journal article, and an encyclopedia entry—China Miéville has established himself as one of the most well-read, insightful, and above all, ambitious theorists of weird fiction. The fact that he is a fiction writer first and foremost is telling. Reading Miéville’s non-fiction, one gets the sense that he understands intimately the symbiosis between fiction and theory that, as I have already claimed, forms the discursive heart of the weird. That is, he treats weird fiction as an opportunity to speculate and hypothesize, a textual workshop built for the demonstration of concepts rather than the object of any rigid taxonomy.

In his afterword to the Vandermeer anthology, Miéville provides a definition of the weird mode that transcends this-or-that questions of its genre status, emphasising instead its ontology: the kind of being in the world that it depicts. Specifically, Miéville argues that the weird is a counterweight to the illusion of world-ness in fiction: not the construction of a particular world, then, but the annihilation of all worlds-in-general, as well as the principle of world-ing itself. The weird, he claims, represents the cracks in both the conception and the reality of the world, any world: a radical weft or fissuring alterity that renders all distinction between “natural” and “supernatural” irrelevant.

Additionally however, the weird also gives monstrous, physical form to the rents in the world’s fabric, or, rather, it fills these gaps with monsters. Miéville’s weird inheres in the unavoidable fact that the human race is “watched from holes” (“Afterweird” 1115) in the world: the concomitant sensation of being gazed at, as well as being somehow affected by that gaze.

the Weird is not a new iteration of fatefulness, but its rebuke, a contingency, a newness that shreds [any] sealed totality .... The fact of the Weird is the fact that the worldweave is ripped and unfinished. Moth-eaten, ill-made. And that through the little tears, from behind the ragged edges, things are looking at us. ("Afterweird" 1115)

One of the few genuinely persuasive definitions of the weird, Miéville's interpretation is particularly notable for the way it avoids simply reshaping the world around a mythology, even a terrifyingly alien one like Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos (a point noted at length by Robert M. Price in his essay "Demythologizing Cthulhu" from 1984). Weird fiction's objective is thus not to reconstruct a sensible narrative or schema for the world, but to "rebuke" the project behind such a schema. Its goal is to convey the absence of a "sealed totality," a picture wherein any reality could be said to be given. One of the implicit contentions guiding Miéville's critical work is that such worldly narratives are already thread-bare, "ill-made," "unfinished" and incomplete. It is, rather, the gaps in this grand narrative that the weird fixates upon, pulling at the "ragged" edges of the fissures by reflecting them in sign and speech.

Miéville's critical interventions on behalf of weird fiction can be understood further by comparing them with one of the more rigorous theories of world-ness in contemporary genre theory: the one espoused by Fredric Jameson in his seminal essay "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre" (1975). Much of what precedes Jameson's discussion of romance—or, more precisely, romantic fantasy—involves the exposition of two difference kinds of world-ness: the "exoteric" and the "esoteric." For Jameson, exoteric world-ness "conveys a physical and geographical sense of landscape," a "realm" with history and place-names attached to it, and which is directly accessible via a character's "sense perception" (141). Esoteric world-ness, on the other hand, denotes *world* in the idealist or ontological sense, an organizational framework containing the "various empirical innerworldly phenomena" of the exoteric (141).

The esoteric world is phenomenally estranged from the exoteric as a result of having its epistemological nature sealed, cut off from the empirical world wherein perception takes place. In genre theory terms then, the exoteric and esoteric occupy separate narrative planes, different fields of representation, which are necessarily at odds. However, Jameson argues that it is through the genre of romance that these two modes of world-ness are reconciled, the very “form in which the [esoteric] world-ness of the [exoteric] world reveals itself” (142). In other words, the nature of the esoteric grand narrative reveals itself in and through the romance tropes of magic and the supernatural, laying bear the laws which govern the realm of the exoteric. Through being intertwined in this way, Jameson, continues, both narratives can be told simultaneously:

For romance, then, both uses of the term are appropriate, for romance as a literary form is that event in which world in the technical sense of the transcendental horizon of my experience becomes precisely visible as something like an innerworldly object in its own right, taking on the shape of world in the popular sense of nature, landscape, and so forth. (142)

The glimpses of this “transcendental horizon” in the realm of romance suggest that the genre is defined by a narrative completeness, a transparency governing all aspects of world, and the narrative mechanisms by which they are relayed. Such glimpses can reveal the machinations of both good and evil forces. However, what is important is that it is human characters who do the glimpsing, and that every object in their field of vision (“nature, landscape, and so forth”) is either literally or symbolically demonstrative of a world at their fingertips, a world in which they are always at the centre.

What, in light of Jameson’s definition of romance, could be said about a world of representation whose narrative-“weave” remains unfinished, and in which glimpses between spheres are solely the domain of the “things” outside the exoteric landscape? As Miéville points out, in so far as it acknowledges that “the [extra-diegetic] world is always-already

unrepresentable,” weird fiction’s world-ness demonstrates a “radical humility in the face of Weird ontology itself” (“Weird Fiction” 512). The weird’s ontology of the unrepresentable is reflected in many stories which comment directly on worldly intractability. In M. P. Shiel’s “The House of Sounds” (1911) for example, the world is “no fit habitation, but a Machine of Death, a baleful Immense,” and elsewhere a “monstrous automaton” filled with “the rushing shriek of Being” (76). Ligotti’s “The Sect of the Idiot” (1928) goes further, the narrator describing his relationship with the world around him in terms of a “fantastic homelessness” and lack of consequence: “I was nothing more than an unseen speck lost in the convolutions of strange schemes” (203). This oppressive moment, wherein the world-ness of the world reveals itself *as nothing*, as a void insensitive to any human desire for narrative, is arguably the emblematic trope of weird fiction: the fulcrum around which its motifs oscillate like different shades of oblivion.

In elucidating how Miéville’s theory of weird fiction can be viewed as a response to Jameson’s definition of romance, it is worth discussing some of the more Heideggerean inflections of Jameson’s thesis. Jameson refers explicitly to Heidegger later in his article, utilising the Heideggerean concept of *Stimmung* (“mood”) to characterise world-ness “in its strongest, most oppressive sense, as when a landscape seems to us charged with foreboding” (146). However, a specific kind of mood within Heidegger’s taxonomy seems even more apposite for exploring the anxiety-stricken oppressiveness as it appears in weird fiction: *Angst*. In describing how *Angst* or anxiety functions in a Heideggerean sense, I do not seek to present any comprehensive overview of his phenomenology. Rather, my goal is to suggest how such terminology can contribute to an understanding of world-ness as a construct in fiction, and the weird in particular.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger takes pains to distinguish simple fear and its object from the object of *Angst* (*sich ängsten*). “The only threatening which can be ‘fearsome,’ and

which gets discovered in fear,” he says, “always comes from entities within-the-world”; that is, from the other beings who we share the world with, and constitute the public face of *Dasein* (“being-there”) (230; original emphasis). The object of angst, however, is not any “entity-within-the-world,” but precisely that threat which causes the subject to flee towards the public, “towards entities within-the-world by absorbing itself into them” (230). The threat that causes *Angst* “is completely indefinite,” an “indefiniteness” which, for Heidegger, is “factically undecided”; never showing a face or a nature, it is simply *there*. However, despite this undecidability, the indefinite object of anxiety has what might be called an affective value, in that it “tells us that entities within-the-world are not ‘relevant’ at all” (230). “Here,” says Heidegger, “the totality of [human] involvements” in the world reveal themselves to be “of no consequence”: “the world has the character of completely lacking significance”; “it collapses into itself” (230-31).

While this affect charging the phenomenological world with inconsequence is important, so too is the fact that the space from where the object of anxiety arrives to meet us is as indeterminate as the thing itself:

when something threatening brings itself close, anxiety does not ‘see’ any definite ‘here’ or ‘yonder’ from which it comes. That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is *nowhere*. Anxiety ‘does not know’ what that in the face of which it is anxious is. ‘Nowhere’ however, does not signify nothing ... Therefore that which threatens cannot bring itself close from a definite direction within that which is close by; it is already ‘there’, and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath, and yet it is nowhere. (231; original emphasis)

Fundamentally absent and invisible, yet radically omnipresent, this “nothing and nowhere” is deeply redolent of weird fiction’s obsession with gaps and in-between-ness. Not only does the “the nothing and nowhere” object of being’s anxiety in the world remind us of the thing-haunted “holes” in Miéville’s “world-weave”; it is also reminiscent of the well-known extract

from the *Necronomicon* in Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" (1929)—that monsters out of space and time reside "[n]ot in the spaces we know, but *between* them ... undimensioned and to us unseen" (219; original emphasis). However, it is not just literal gaps and fissures out of nowhere that Heidegger invokes as being the source of *Angst*, but also gaps within narrative, and specifically the hole-ridden narratives reflecting the public world of being. "The utter insignificance which makes itself known in the 'nothing and nowhere'", he argues,

does not signify that the world is absent, but tells us that the entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this *insignificance* of what is within-the-world, the world and its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself. (231; original emphasis)

What is suggested here is that "worldhood" could be considered a story without a foundation; it reveals itself as a diegetic blank which can offer no consolation, in itself, to the lives of entities-in-the-world. The many micro-narratives of being are (over-)shadowed by a nothing that irradiates them with "insignificance," and the "'world' can offer nothing more" than this (232). For Heidegger, "[a]nxiety thus takes away from *Dasein* the possibility of understanding itself ... in terms of the 'world' and the way things have been publicly interpreted" (232; original emphasis). In other words, *Angst* hinges on the subject's failure to locate themselves within a determinate narrative of being, a narrative that can claim to be more than simply public interpretation and, as a result, grant true meaning.

Heidegger's phenomenology suggests a basis for the weird's philosophical world view, while also providing a ground for correlating the arguments of Miéville and Jameson in the context of genre. The weird is a literature of *Angst* in that it represents, in various forms, the disintegration of any reliable narrative master code for interpreting the world or its "weave" according to a human idiom. What remains after the collapse of such narrative codes is an ontology of oppressiveness, an anxiety in the world of the weird text that can neither be avoided nor escaped. The weird's ontology of oppression and anxiety confirm it as being



pervaded by what John Clute calls *Vastation*. Adapting the term from seventeenth century theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, Clute argues that Vastation in horror “contagiously joins the world ... to the sentient creatures (almost always humans) tethered to its disintegrating and/or newly exposed frame” (148-49). Clute adds the crucial caveat that Vastation in fiction is always interwoven with narrative, with the circuits of representation via which the worlds of the texts come into being. In horror and the weird, Vastation functions as a narrative circuit-breaker, signifying

a vision of the deranging effect of the world on story ... and consequently upon the utterands of Story, who are usually us. Vastation occurs when the ‘malignant system of the world’ (as Le Fanu puts it) is tearing you apart: after Vastation, the utterands of Story, and Story itself, falls into dead silence: for there is no way to proceed. (149)

Ironically, while Story and World in the idealist sense fall into “dead silence,” the weird makes this “failure to proceed” any further a positive feature of its own storytelling. Its tales represent a phonemic heightening of failure’s catastrophe, a ceaseless circling around the “nothing and nowhere” of the world story.

Following such narrative catastrophe, the temptation for other genre fictions might be to explain away Vastation’s “dead silence,” resituating it within another grand narrative which could resolve its enigma. However, the weird differs from such fictions—including much horror—in that it refuses to re-narrativize Vastation, to assimilate it back within a recognisable language or mythos. In an interview with *Weird Fiction Review*, Ligotti describes the difference between weird fiction and horror as, once again, relating to the perpetuation of enigma, and not its resolution:

there is an enigma at the heart of the [weird] story, a mystery that cannot be solved and that keeps the story alive. With horror stories, it’s the exact opposite: there must be a ‘legend’ for the horrific goings-on and this legend must be revealed in the story ... Horror legends are

endlessly reusable and have a logical or pseudo-logical explanation. Weird narratives are usually one of a kind and leave an enigma behind them. (n.p.)

Similar to Heidegger's distinction between the object of fear and the object of anxiety then, horror and the weird are similarly divided. Horror fiction is tied to things in the world, and to the legends and cosmogonies of their creation. Weird fiction seeks no such justifications from the world of myth to find a suitable ending to its stories. In demolishing the idea of an esoteric world narrative entirely, an ideal behind the mundane, the weird is arguably a celebration of storytelling almost entirely detached from the allegorical. What is left after such frameworks are removed is nothing other than language in itself, and the striving to reflect the thought-forms of failure in an unimaginable grammar.

### The Riddle of the World: The Weird as Mode and as Genre

Given the weird's complicated relationship to the norms and conventions of world-building, one might argue that its genre status remains equally uncertain. If one is to take Stephen Heath's definition of genres—that they are “horizons of expectation for listeners or readers” and “models of production for speakers or writers”—as indicative of a consensus on the subject of what genre means today, then the weird seems manifestly *not* a genre (169). This is because Heath's definition affirms a conservatism at the root of genre as a concept, its insistence on maintaining a shared framework of relations between texts, writers, publishers and readers that admits of little or no *aporia*:

Genres are stabilizations of relations of communication. Necessarily conservative inasmuch as they depend on the reworking of recognized ways of making sense, they are also possible sites for a conservatism that turns recognition and reworking into regulation and repetition, into laws which are institutionally supported in one way or another. (169)

As I have already demonstrated, weird fiction narrativizes the *de*-stabilization of “relations of communication.” The narrative strategies that it reworks are harnessed to a refusal of “recognized ways of making sense.” While the weird does utilise reiterable speech motifs, referring to them as aspects of genre seems disingenuous, given the indeterminacy to which they are in service.

A different way of conceiving weird fiction is suggested by Jeff Vandermeer, who, in the introduction to *The Weird*, describes it as both a “sensation” and a “mode of writing” (xvi). The term “mode” has had a long and contested currency in the history of genre theory. Heath, for example, defines “modes of enunciation,” which are distinct from genres in that they “belong to the pragmatics of language,” as a series of possibilities for language use which can be mobilised by genres “to some specific end” (167). Jameson, on the other hand, interprets mode in a more diachronic fashion, designating it as a “type of literary discourse” not “bound to the conventions of a given age,” but which “persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods” (142). What is important for both Jameson and Heath is that mode denotes a method of telling a story in a specific kind of language, one which can be made use of by any genre: in Jameson’s words, modes are “formal possibilities” for genres “which can be revived and renewed” over time for different reasons and to different ends.

Frow offers a particularly insightful elucidation of the relationship between mode and genre, which builds on the ideas of Jameson and Heath. In his book *Genre*, Frow insists on the ontology presupposed by individual genres, that they signify “formal structures” which operate “at a level of semiosis – that is, of meaning making – which is deeper and more forceful than that of the explicit ‘content’ of a text” (19). It is from this argument that he arrives at his definition of genre as a world-building model which exceeds the simply literary, being “central to the different ways the world is understood” in any medium (2).

Against the “formal structures” of genre, which possess their own laws of “authority and plausibility” (2) in the sense defined by Todorov in his definition of the fantastic (“[t]he fantastic is that hesitation, experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event”) (25), Frow echoes Jameson and Heath in defining mode as “formal possibility”: in other words, the possibility of deploying structures in different ways through different uses of language. However, Frow adds the caveat that modes are ““adjectival,”” and that their relationship to genre is based on “qualifications and modifications” (65). Modes are, he claims,

the extensions of certain genres beyond specific and time-bound formal structures to a broader specification of ‘tone.’ ... [T]hey specify thematic features and certain forms and modalities of speech, but not the formal structures or even the semiotic medium through which the text is to be realised. (65)

Frow’s emphasis on “tone,” as being a mode’s key modifier of a genre, provides a welcome clarification of how “formal structure” and “formal possibility” are connected. Such a definition of mode explains persuasively how the weird has survived its gestation in the ferment of early twentieth-century pulp fantasy, to now encompass many fictions which were never marketed under the rubric of its label at the time. In his foreword to *The Weird*, Michael Moorcock talks candidly about the weird’s syncretism, arguing that

The weird story can contain all the quality of a fine Modernist writer like [Joseph] Conrad or [Elizabeth] Bowen, a great popular novelist like [Graham] Green or a master of the numinous like [Joe R.] Lansdale ... Weird? We’re clearly comfortable with a term covering pretty much anything from absurdism to horror, even occasionally social realism. (xi)

Crucially, Moorcock emphasises the broadness of weird fiction, and the idea that such broadness is sustained by the uncertainty regarding its status. Like its many enigmas, its genre status also resists easy resolution. What seems assured is that it will continue to offer

potential ways for making the formal structures of genre less easy to fathom, modifying recognisable worlds and categories in a way that reveals the mystery shadowing them all.

The premise of my thesis was initially founded on a similar conviction: that the weird is unproblematically a mode in Frow's sense, representing a way of telling a story with a certain tonal or stylistic inflection, a manner of speech used to reflect—and then shatter—the world of any genre it appears in. However, my position has gradually evolved to a more equivocal perspective. While the weird certainly exemplifies “certain forms and modalities of speech,” it becomes, the more one studies it, increasingly difficult to limit its significance to a purely illocutionary conceit. This is due, as I have already suggested, to the weird's discursive obsession with worlds, with the norms and conventions by which they come into being. While it fixates on such conventions in order to negate them, the weird seems implicated in genre insofar as it interrogates the “effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility” that appear alongside it (2).

I have come to the conclusion that weird fiction challenges two of the unspoken dichotomies of genre theory, both of which can be seen at different levels in the work of Heath, Jameson, and Frow: that is, the binaries of world/genre and language/mode. Specifically, weird fiction sets up recognisable worlds for the purpose of annulling them via language, making them in turn unrecognizable and shapeless. In so doing, it admits of no basis for the reality of a world other than the language via which the laws of that world are annulled. In other words, the world of the weird is revealed to be entirely a modal contrivance, an artifice of language which self-deconstructs, annihilated at the very moment when its laws are called into question by the unnameable of language.

A notable example of this textual annihilation of world-ness in the weird is offered by Michael Cisco's story “Translation” (1998). Originally intended for publication in an anthology devoted to Lovecraft's malign trickster deity Nyarlathotep (known variably as the

“crawling chaos” and the “Lord of a Thousand Forms”), “Translation” takes the eponymous discipline to dizzyingly apocalyptic heights as the story’s two Egyptologists, Theodore and Eleanor, endeavour to translate a demotic version of the *Book of Nephren-Ka* (an anecdotal account of the fictionalised pharaoh’s consorting with Nyarlathotep). Seeking to perceive a sensible pattern within the text, they soon discover that “the pattern that emerged came out in them, not in the translation” (87), as the process of discovering a “total order” and meaning to the manuscript assumes perversely erotic dimensions:

[Theodore] saw the entire text unfold in front of him in calculine symmetry as a single statement, a single word, a single name, and he felt his spirit being ravished half out of himself, to see such unanthropic order so impossible to grasp but close enough to intelligibility to flicker as intangibly as fire on his nerves, a fire-faceted blossom in a shadowy spot just beyond possible reach, but nevertheless real and meaningful, a word written by a man blind and insane; to think of its all at once he felt pure abstract flavorless pleasure drain into him down his long nerves, feeling beautiful, anonymous, fainting back into a soft little aperture of pleasure in space (88-89)

No sooner has the erogenous zone of the manuscript reached a climax of “anonymous” pleasure—extending its own textual organism via the coupling of the translators in intercourse—than the eroticism of its translation becomes Thanatotic, oriented towards death and an apocalyptic second coming. The translators’ sense of wholeness at having constructed a three-dimensional textual world falls into shadow, as they lose themselves to its “calculine symmetry” and the nonhuman life-cycle harboured within the manuscript:

He looked back to find he had disappeared, he was watching himself not being there, where he had always been before—suddenly the panicky idea that he had never been there, that he had only ever been the fear in that one moment, happening to no one and wholly confined to itself. ... His body had not changed, but he felt it differently, he was directly conscious of the ghostly life that was there in each smallest part. (90)

By the end of the story, the lives of the translators, as well as the greater species life of the world, have been annulled by the piecing together of a textual construct, the “single name” mentioned earlier, which, we are led to believe, is “Nyarlathep” (whose coming heralds the awakening of the chaotic demiurge Azathoth and, consequently, the death of the universe). Not only does the story illustrate a modal source for unhinging and negating the contrivance of world; it also exemplifies weird fiction’s own sense of genre-awareness, a mindfulness of the way text generates, but also distorts and effaces the idea of reality as an ordered plan.

In Frow’s terms, weird tales like Cisco’s “Translation” can be thought of as “metacommunications about their [generic] frames,” but also metacommunications regarding the reliability of frame-narratives in general (17). They reveal their own “generic framework” for the sole purpose of absorbing it back into the semiotic black hole from which it was modally arranged (Frow 83). Consequently, whatever generic world the weird appears in— weird sci-fi, weird fantasy, weird noir, or weird western—its aims are to reduce the recognizable face of that genre-world into a series of questions without answers.

Another way of conceptualising the weird in relation to genre and mode is to think of it in terms of the riddle. Frow spends several pages of his book discussing the riddle as genre, arguing that “it works as a basic language game built on the social dynamics of question and answer, or challenge and response, and explores these dynamics through the control of an enigmatic or hidden knowledge” (31). Arguably, it is precisely the riddle’s emphasis on the performativity of language, its ludic potential for exposing the linguistic basis for the reality-effects of a given situation, which makes it both genre *and* mode. That is, the riddle can be thought of both in terms of the “formal structures” of a world in language, the performative or “social dynamics” which enables participatory recognition, *and* the “formal possibilities” of utterance within which that world is conceived.

In similar fashion to the riddle, weird fiction also engages with the conventions of language in the sense of revealing an occulted knowledge, the esoteric framework of a world or plan. However, the revelation is precisely that any such “generic framework” is altogether absent from the world of the weird, at least as anything other than an arbitrary complicity of signs. Cisco’s “What He Chanced to Mould in Play” (2007), the second of his two stories on Nyarlathotep, illustrates this semiotic complicity in the form of a word game, again with apocalyptic consequences. A character named Thot is lured to an abandoned building in a Coney Island theme park, where he meets the “Middle Eastern academic” Arlath. Engaging Thot in a conversation on the possibility of the world being little more than the passive creation of an unknowing dreamer (“We know that dreams don’t last, are fleeting, that is in the nature of dreams. So, if everything that exists is a dream, then we can expect the dreamer to wake up, and everything in existence to disappear”) (116), Arlath soon reveals himself as the “facilitator or fabricator” of Thot’s own dreaming of the world into existence. This world-dream, Arlath informs him, is ready to come to an end:

He takes his business card from his jacket pocket and shows it to me, his eyes locked on mine. He then takes a pen from the breast pocket of his shirt and writes on the card, holding it up for me to see. Before his name he has written N Y, and his name he has written O T E P. He shows me this, and stares into my eyes. Then he writes again on the card, and holds it up a second time. He has written my name. He writes again on the card and holds it up a third time. He has written N Y A R L A before my name, and E P after my name. ‘The messenger,’ he says, trying to call it out of my memory. ‘The message,’ he says. He writes again on the card, my name, then writes again and holds up the card. Before my name, A Z A, after my name, the letter H. (117)

The relationship between Nyarlathotep and Azathoth, arguably Lovecraft’s two most potent elder beings, is registered here in almost entirely semiotic terms, as a riddling interlocation between messenger/medium and message. The annulment of the world via Azathoth’s timely



awakening is almost ludic (hence the “Play” of the story’s title), enacted in the form of a riddle carried out in the context of an arbitrary meeting in an arbitrary location.

Another weird tale which unfolds its absent framework according to the logic of a riddle is T. E. D. Klein’s “Ladder” (1990), a tale which includes “the desperate search for a pattern” as part of its epigram. In Klein’s story, the narrator looks back on his life lived in the shadow of an inscrutable design, a God-given pattern into which he blindly put his faith. “[Y]ou can’t see the pattern while you’re living it,” he deplores, “And you certainly can’t see it while you’re busy being born, ... the damnable game already begun” (388). With the benefit of age and hindsight, he beholds the horrifying truth: that the occluded pattern he had hoped to discern in his life is nothing but a game, a mystifying riddle of language whose framework is bereft of reason or consolation. Every significant moment, beginning with “birth” and ending with “death,” is nothing more than a frivolous play of letter substitution, a “word ladder” determining life’s course according to the most random of logics. Here, life’s pattern, if it can truly be called a pattern, is reduced to the blindest, most vacuous semiotic complicity: a word game which can only end in one way—“DEATH.”

In this sense, the riddle of weird fiction is always a rigged game, a *riddling* of the world with the very kind of holes and gaps noted by Miéville. While it makes plain the “schema” of its world, what Frow calls the “the unsaid of texts, the organisation of information which lies latent in a shadowy region from which we draw it as we need it,” it does so in a way that compounds the problem infinitely (83). In the weird, the “unsaid of texts” is nothing more than the shadows out of text, which can neither be fathomed nor used to piece together a narrative that might cohere things sensibly. Indeed, the solution to the weird’s riddle is more or less echoed in the hermetically sealed ouroboros which Frow describes as being the subtext to every riddle in general: “When one does not know what it is then it is something; but when one knows what it is, then it is nothing” (35).

Consequently, the weird represents an unassimilable remainder, a riddle of text that has stakes in both mode and genre. It is a way of telling a story modally, but it is also an engagement with the reality-effects of truth, authority, and plausibility of Clute's *story*: the greater esoteric (in a Jamesonian sense) organisation of the narrative world, which finds its correlate in the many organisational schemas through which we interpret our own extra-diegetic world. Weird fiction's stories are not performative of story, but rather the performative failure of Story to attain coherence and schematic value. The way such failure manifests is simultaneously horrifying and ludic, a Babel tower of indeterminate codes and meanings. This sense of play in the weird fits with Brian Edwards's assertion that "[o]ntological and epistemological uncertainties promote communication by recognising that words are allusive, gamesome and pluralistic, simultaneously both host and parasite in the creation of texts by writers and readers" (4). The lack of any "final truth claim" presupposed by the weird text is an effect of its insistence on prolixity, the overuse of language for the purpose of staking out its limits. To echo Edwards, "the processes of communication that are" the weird's "enabling condition are also the processes by which their instability can be demonstrated." (4-5).

### Conclusion: "A Subtle Attitude of Awed Listening"

Arguably, my attempt to define the field of weird fiction via an analysis of its criticism has been marked by an undecidability: a failure to provide any concrete answer to the question of where the weird fits within the speculative fiction oeuvre. However, I hope to prove by the end of this thesis that if a spirit of the weird inheres in anything, then it is in conversation without closure. That is, the weird emerges as something worth studying when it is reflected

in a dialogue—fictive, critical, or both—carried out in the same spirit of ludic indeterminacy, and which admits of the “instability” of its own “processes of communication.”

This dialogic typology is nowhere better represented than in the recent efforts by writers to assess a possible trajectory for weird fiction, a movement which, several years ago, was briefly coalesced around the term “New Weird.” The bulk of the conversation was carried out on the online message board of M. John Harrison, and amidst all the scepticism and impassioned defences of the nascent scene and its marketable definitions, there was one commentator—Henry Farrell—whose words, for me, rang the loudest in the most circumspect fashion:

It seems to me that to describe the New Weird as a movement or a school is to fall into a trap ... I reckon it's more useful to think of the New Weird as an argument. An argument between a bunch of writers who read each other, who sometimes influence each other, sometimes struggle against that influence. Who don't ever agree on what the New Weird is, on where it starts and stops, but are prepared to harangue each other about it. (*The New Weird* 325)

To “writers who read each other,” I would add critics who listen to writers, and to each other, critics who de-centre the question of genre from definition to open-ended deliberation. It is at this point that Lovecraft's requirement for the weird, that it be accompanied by “a subtle attitude of awed listening,” attains an almost ethical dimension (“Supernatural Horror in Literature” 427). If a spirit of the weird and weird fiction criticism emerges by the end of my thesis, I hope it will be one of hesitation, a spirit that celebrates the proliferation of names and labels while settling on none at all: in fact, an ethos which exemplifies Jameson's point that “methodological hesitation between a structural analysis and a semantics of genre must find its ultimate source in the ambiguous constitution of language itself” (137). What could be more characteristic of the spirit of weird fiction than this: a hesitation to speak which nonetheless exults in speech, and in language's “ambiguous constitution.” In a sense, the

following words from weird fiction writer and reader Mark Samuels from *The Nightmare Network* in 2014 constitute a mantra I have attempted to adhere to throughout: “To challenge, not reaffirm. To explore, not define. To work at the edge and not just at the centre” (mark\_Samuels n.p.).

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Weird Speech Act: A Möbian Performative**

Nothing remains unfathomable forever. No matter how remote the impulse or how emptyreal  
the dream, we are always able to codify our visions, to tether our impulses by naming them.

- Richard Gavin, "The  
Eldritch Faith," 201

In the introduction, I argued that weird fiction's primary method for producing "effects of reality and truth" was its self-theorising relationship to language (Frow 2). That is, weird fiction reflects, usually in horrific terms, on the clumsy and arbitrary structures of meaning, sense, and reference that are so often taken for granted in our use of language, both in literature and beyond. My thesis addresses the weird mode's obsession with interrogating these structures, exploring the speech patterns through which the weird conducts its many experiments. One of the most frequently used devices for theorizing the gap between language and reference in weird fiction is a speech act, or a performative utterance, that is found throughout the mode in various forms. This prototypical weird speech act is the halting, sometimes indirect, but always oblique attempt to name the unnameable.

The idea of naming that which cannot be named arises in certain climactic moments in weird fiction as a way of dramatising the failure of language to describe or name an object, a situation, or a sensation. Naming the unnameable signals the attempt to represent something that eludes positive representation, or that seems to possess a wholly negative semantic value. Thus, the unnameable can be described as a void-concept: an idea whose meaning lies in the negation of what it denotes. Further, it exists on a lexical continuum with similar void-concepts which are interchangeable within the context of the weird speech act: indescribable, unknowable, unspeakable, unutterable, incomprehensible, nameless, etc.

Naming the unnameable is a speech act whose means of expression is variable, and can be detected even when the term “unnameable” is not actually used. Thus, the cosmic voyager Chalmers in Frank Belknap Long’s “The Hounds of Tindalos” (1929), on encountering the eponymous entities beyond the fabric of space and time, responds to the narrator’s question “What were *they* like?” with the negative statement “No words in our language can describe them!” (67). Similarly, in Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson” (1839), on encountering the image of his double, the narrator makes a statement regarding his feelings that forms also a rhetorical, unanswered question: “But what human language can adequately portray that astonishment, that horror which possessed me at the spectacle then presented to view” (129). Miss Leicester, the narrator of Arthur Machen’s “Novel of the White Powder” (1895), also finds herself lost for words when attempting to describe her feelings on seeing her brother, a victim of the eponymous powder and its malign effects: “my heart leapt up, and fell down, down as into a deep hollow, and I was amazed with a dread and terror without form or shape” (75).

H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Unnamable” (1925), a story best described as weird fiction’s *ars poetica* on “unnameability,” goes further in attempting to provide a positive way of speaking about the unnameable, a response that, unlike the stories above, doesn’t simply amount to a refusal to speak (“No words in our language can”...etc.). Joel Manton, when asked by the narrator for a description of the thing he alone witnessed, falls back on abstract and hyperbolic language to give an impression of it:

It was everywhere—a gelatin—a slime—yet it had shapes, a thousand shapes of horror beyond all memory. There were eyes—and a blemish. It was the pit—the maelstrom—the ultimate abomination. Carter, *it was the unnamable!* (88; original emphasis)

Lovecraft’s story, its title and—in particular—this quotation, exemplifies how the word “unnameable” operates in much weird fiction as both a noun and an adjective. As a result of

Manton's failure to properly adjectivize the "thing"—to name any attributes which might achieve linguistic precision—the adjective "unnameable" takes the place of the thing itself as a noun, to which other, suitably hyperbolic adjectives may be applied.

However, in the contexts in which it usually occurs, contexts which often necessitate the undertaking of some kind of action in the face of an overwhelming terror, the unnameable also works as a verb. Or rather, it constitutes a kind of adverbial phrase referring to an abortive act of naming, one in which the speaker attempts, and fails, to name the entity or vision he is confronted with. Naming the unnameable is thus a unique speech act in that it makes failure a kind of action. It is a thing enacted, but a thing that is always in a way already enacted, an action whose result is seemingly determined in advance by the limits of language, which always forbid the absolute success of the naming procedure involved.

Nonetheless, in spite of this seeming dead end, weird fiction accomplishes the weird speech act in a kind of linguistic leap, in which the conventions that underlie naming, and other acts of language, are momentarily transcended. It is precisely through the unnameable's significance as an adverbial phrase—the failed act of naming it implies—that the transaction between noun and adjective is achieved. The attempted act of naming initiates, in the moment of its failure, another kind of act, one that does not simply negate the previous act of naming, but broadens the compass of what we call naming in general. Born in the wake of naming's failure to account for something, the unnameable, in becoming a noun, becomes that very something. It obliterates its referent in the process of putting it into speech, and thereby supplants it, taking its place within discourse. In doing this, it inverts naming's one-way procedure of ascribing words to things, making of it a process that is internal to language: from things back to words, a process running parallel to naming but interfering with it at the same time.

A useful way of conceiving how the weird speech act operates both within and against linguistic convention is the image of the *Möbius strip*, a metaphor that I will make use of throughout this chapter. Much like the infinite circulations made possible by such a strip, the unnameable in weird fiction can be thought of as self-devouring. An ouroboros within language, the unnameable circles back around on itself, interrogating the propositions that make it both understandable and functional within the framework of the language in which it is used. In this context, naming the unnameable forms one of the key tropes in weird fiction's obsession with language and meaning-making. The fallibility of descriptive language becomes, in weird fiction, a performative exploration of the horror that can often accompany the disintegration of meaning and reference. In problematising the discourse of naming, and the often arbitrary rules by which names shape the world, weird fiction brings out not only the weirdness of the things language deigns to describe, but also language itself.

### Rosemary Jackson and "Non-signification" in Lovecraft

As I have said, naming the unnameable represents a jumping-off point for my analysis of weird fiction, and its engagement with its own rules of meaning-making. As a speech act that seems to unravel the logic of its propositions, naming the unnameable can be viewed as emblematic of the weird's own deconstructive approach to language and discourse. Despite this however, there is still the question of why it is important to treat the unnameable, in the manner I have defined it, as anything other than self-evidently problematic. In other words, it remains to be argued how and why the unnameable deserves special treatment, as anything other than a slightly capricious figure of speech.

In addressing this question, it is helpful to refer to the work of Rosemary Jackson, whose book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* gives an account of unnameability, under the title of "non-signification," in the work of Lovecraft and others. The continued value of



Jackson's analysis is that it provides a semantico-linguistic framework for assessing the ambivalence of terms like the unnameable. Such signs signify an absence of meaning, "a discourse without an object," one that, for Jackson, constitutes both a set of operations and a thematics for the genre of fantasy (40). My debt to Jackson is considerable, and much of this chapter is devoted to an elaboration and extension of her (necessarily) brief discussion of Lovecraft. Two points in this discussion were particularly influential on my thinking for this chapter. Firstly, she writes that Lovecraft's tales "are particularly self-conscious in their stress on the impossibility of naming this unnameable presence, the 'thing' which can be registered in the text only as absence and shadow" (39). Secondly, she qualifies the above assertion by describing the manner in which "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936) "circles around this dark area in an attempt to get beyond language to something other," noting however that "the endeavour to visualize the unseen and unsayable is one which inevitably falls short, except by drawing attention to exactly this difficulty of utterance" (39).

My study of the weird speech act takes two metaphors from Jackson's analysis as guiding and fundamental: (1) the *performativity* of naming, and (2) the attendant circularity of this performativity. My argument is that naming the unnameable constitutes both an attempt at a performative—that is, the performative of naming—and an in-built anticipation of the certain failure of this attempt. The performance is thus marked by a resignation but also a perverse theatricality: acquiescing to its own failure in advance, it nonetheless strives to make such failure a positive quality by persisting in spite of it.

Such circularity, however, exceeds the scope of Jackson's interpretation. Naming the unnameable, in weird fiction, does not content itself with simply "drawing attention to ... this difficulty of utterance" but literally performs that difficulty. It circumscribes the very limits of naming-discourse in the moment of its enunciation, putting those limits at stake in the

infinitely deferred climax of the performance. The unnameable is not a “discourse without an object,” but a performative and circular discourse whose object is nothing other than itself.

In expanding on Jackson’s approach to the unnameable, I am motivated by the desire to do justice to the complexity of the term, not only for its own sake, but with a view to the knowledge that its detailed analysis can provide for weird fiction when the latter is understood as a mode. My application of a diverse range of theoretical approaches to the weird, here as throughout my project, is far from arbitrary. Such an approach arises from a conviction that there are aspects of weird fiction which would remain confused or obscure without the mechanisms for critical thought that such theories provide. The two-pronged approach that I have already summarised proceeds from this conviction, as well as from the faith that analysing fiction through diverse theoretical paradigms can generate new ways for applying such paradigms in the future.

### Perceiving the Unnameable: Ineffability

The weird speech act establishes a grammar for the unnameable by appropriating languages and concepts from areas outside of fiction. Such supplementary languages are useful because they grapple with a similar problem to the weird speech act: how to speak of a thing about which, through alien-ness or sheer magnitude, seemingly nothing can be said. The way naming the unnameable is recast, in terms of a problem of theology (the “ineffable,” or “numinous”) or of aesthetics (the “sublime”) feeds into the grammar of the weird speech act, allowing for certain comparisons to be made between weird fiction and these anterior fields. In many cases, the weird speech act can be said to also involve an experience of the ineffable and the sublime: each provides a further conceptual tool for understanding the weird’s unnameable, deepening its lore and its mode of expression.

In his “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” Lovecraft links weird fiction’s emphasis on awe and terror with an inherited psychology of sensation that is relevant to both the writing and the reading of the mode. This psychology, he argues, is “as deeply grounded in mental experience as any other pattern or tradition of mankind,” while also being “coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it” (424). Lovecraft’s assertion here seems to rest on the parallel between the writing of literature and a kind of experience of reality: an experience of something *ineffable* within reality, whose sensations can be looked back on and appreciated even if not fully understood. From this, we can infer that in Lovecraft’s terms the unnameable is, at least partially, a literary registering of such an experience. The structures of response that form the background of such “religious feeling,” as Lovecraft puts it, are useful in that they shed light on how the unnameable functions grammatically and semiotically in weird fiction.

Two thinkers whose works are relevant to this discussion are William James and Rudolf Otto. Writing during similar periods, James and Otto, although coming from highly different disciplines (the former psychology, the latter theology) and having markedly different perspectives, share many overlapping conceptions of the religious ineffable and how it can be framed. That is, although they are opposed in terms of their belief structures, both James and Otto (the latter somewhat reluctantly) are forced to admit that experience of the ineffable is always also an experience of language.

Speaking of the pure abstraction of the words usually invested with religious significance, James—in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)—reasons that since such vague conceptions as “‘soul,’ ‘God,’ ‘immortality,’ cover no distinctive sense-content whatever, it follows that theoretically speaking they are words devoid of any significance” (54). Moreover, James reads in the above conceptions something of the “instrumentality of pure ideas,” considering them formless or “bodiless” abstractions which can never be

visualised as such, but only thought, conceived in the private language of the mind (54).

“Such ideas,” he says,

and others equally abstract, form the background for all our facts, the fountain-head of all the possibilities we can conceive of. They give its ‘nature,’ as we call it, to every special thing. Everything we know is ‘what’ it is by sharing in the nature of one of these abstractions. We can never look directly at them, for they are bodiless and featureless and footless, but we grasp all other things by their means (56)

James’s formula here involves a kind of semantic double-take in the face of the ineffable. It begins with an attempted glance at the abstract and “bodiless” conception, a subsequent discovery that it cannot be adequately mapped through sensory data, followed by recourse to a shared tradition of naming, the latter retrospectively forming the “nature” of the conception. However, this shared tradition of naming is, at its heart, a circular practice, since its names and ideas, however familiar they might seem, are always in a sense “bodiless” and “abstract.” Consequently, the language of proper names has the potential to lead its speakers astray: in partaking of language’s “fountain-head of possibilities,” human life remains tied to the “bodiless abstractions” of the ineffable.

In William Hope Hodgson’s weird novella *The House on the Borderland* (1907), there is a moment that dramatises the schism between the unnameable “thing” and the seemingly unfit language of everyday convention given to describe it. The writer of the story’s “manuscript” records his hesitation to speak on certain aspects of his experience, a hesitancy informed by an awareness that conventional language is inadequate for such a task:

My glance fell back upon the huge ass-headed Thing. Simultaneously I recognised it for the ancient Egyptian god Set, or Seth, the Destroyer of Souls. With the knowledge came a great sweep of questioning ... I stopped and endeavoured to think. Things obscured my imagination, peered into my frightened mind. I saw, obscurely. ‘The old gods of mythology!’ (24)

In order to understand the anxieties in this quotation, it is important to grasp the role language plays in the narrator's experience. Transported via dreams to a valley-like "arena" surrounded on both sides by unnameable creatures, he finds that a central component of this spectacle's ineffability lies in the semiosis accompanying it. Arguably, the awed terror of the narrator's experience in the arena is doubled by a series of movements taking place within language itself: recognition, followed by "questioning," leading to an "obscure" naming ("The old gods of mythology!"). The abstractedness of the experience leads the narrator to a language which, according to James's logic, is equally "devoid of any significance," equally abstract. It is almost as if the recourse to a conventional language of myth makes the vision of the "arena" *more* ineffable, not less, and that the true "vision," if it can be called that, lies in the narrator realising that language itself is the thing that obscures ("I saw, obscurely"). Myth, and its structures of meaning and metaphor, seems to annihilate the object of the vision—the arena and its denizens—in the very moment of its perception, replacing it with something entirely semiotic. Like the proper names of "God," "soul," and "immortality" noted by James, epithets like "Set," "Destroyer of Souls," and "Old Gods," take on a spark of unnameable abstraction, recalling the trade-off between what Rosemary Jackson calls "nameless things" (38) and "thingless names" (40).

Ultimately, James is forced to conclude that the force of language's "instrumentality of ideas" exceeds all actual perception of the ineffable. In other words, the ineffable is only allowed to attain "definite meaning for our *practice*" through language's matrix of possibility: as James wryly observes, it is only through language that "we can act *as if* there were a God" (54; original emphasis).

Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), makes similar statements to James regarding the co-dependent relation between religious experience and its linguistic means of expression. Otto's vocation as a theologian guarantees a reluctance to admit that such a

connection is in any way significant. However, the frequency with which he reiterates the importance of language to comprehension of the ineffable suggests that a related experience within language, is always taking place at the same time as any experience of the ineffable object.

Significantly, Otto argues that contemplation of the deity is usually a contemplation of “essential” (but “rational” and “synthetic”) attributes that are limited precisely because they can be comprehended (2). The deity itself, says Otto, is marked by an essence that is incomprehensibly “numinous.” Paradoxically however, this incomprehensible essence must still be given to some form of expression, or else even the fact of its incomprehensibility would escape us:

though [the numinous] eludes our conceptual way of understanding, it must be in some way or other within our grasp, else absolutely nothing could be asserted of it. And even in mysticism, speaking of it as ... the ineffable ... does not really mean to imply that absolutely nothing can be asserted of the object of religious consciousness; otherwise, mysticism could exist only in unbroken silence. (2)

While his argument begins by correlating language with the numinous in terms of the former being the latter’s only viable means of expression, Otto’s theological leanings lead him to backpedal significantly from such a claim. From here, Otto consistently undermines his own attempts to form an expressible theory of the numinous. He chastises the earlier terms of his argument, denying them any real value as concepts, and avowing their impoverished relation to the positive feelings “whose import [they hint] at by analogy” (35). Regarding the concept of “wrath,” he argues, “we are not concerned with a genuine intellectual ‘concept’, but only with a sort of illustrative substitution for a concept” (19). In similar fashion, after giving a definition of “mysterium” (the ineffable *mystery* of the numinous), he admits that such a term

is “merely an ideogram, an analogical notion taken from the natural sphere, illustrating, but incapable of exhaustively rendering, our real meaning” (26).

Ultimately, what seems to haunt Otto is the linguistic elusiveness of conceptuality itself, the way the idea of the numinous flees from meaning and thought in the very moment of its expression, almost as though it fled into the expression. Not only does experience of the numinous remain tied to the ineffable, but so too does the sign “numinous,” due to its lack of any objectifiable referent. As a result, Otto’s thesis remains mired in a stultifying game of semiotic substitution: unable to talk itself out of this bubble of its own making, it succeeds only in illustrating the numinous qualities of language itself.

A similar moment of illustrative substitution can be found in the opening section of Arthur Machen’s “The White People” (1904). Here, the theologian Ambrose explains the quantitative differences between the common evil of the murderer, and the greater “Evil” of the magician or heretic, as connected with a forbidden experience of the divine. “There is, no doubt, an analogy between the two,” he says, “[a]nd sometimes, of course, the two speak, as it were, the same language,” but although “the ‘word’ ... is accidentally the same in each case ... the ‘meaning’ is utterly different” (“The White People” 115). Of this greater “Evil,” the meaning of which the lower case “evil” can barely hint at, he ascribes to it “a certain rapture or ecstasy of the soul; a transcendent effort to surpass the ordinary bounds. So surpassing these, it surpasses also the understanding, the faculty that takes note of that which comes before it” (115).

What the metaphysical convolutions in Machen’s story make inadvertently clear is that it is not only the “ecstasy of the soul” in question that surpasses human understanding; so too does any sign that might stand in for such ecstasies in speech. Removing the Catholic Machen’s moral essentialisms from the equation, whatever qualitative differences might exist between the lower case “evil” and the more portentous upper case “Evil” are contrivances of

language only, though they are no less remarkable for that. After all, it is through “analogy,” or the grammar of allusion and implication, that the meaning of “Evil” is allowed to be understood. Above all, the point is that any need to substitute words, symbols, and analogies for what are, ultimately, other words, symbols, and analogies (however ineffably greater they might be), is itself a circular process of language. Apprehension of the ineffable object is revealed to be governed by semiotic constraints as much as phenomenological ones. Such an object becomes ineffable only when we give utterance to this ineffability: for instance, when we speak the word “evil” in a metaphysical or theological context.

Machen’s story and its capitalised “Evil” relates directly to a sensation of horror accompanying the ineffable that is treated by both James and Otto in similar ways. This spiritual horror—what James calls the “sick soul,” and Otto “creature-feeling”—can be described in both cases as a feeling of absolute negation, a self-effacing smallness in the shadow of the divine. Crucially however, the “sick soul” and “creature-feeling” also relate to naming the unnameable in that they both involve a horrific experience of language. Otto defines “creature-feeling” as “the emotion of a creature,” specifically a *human* creature, “submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (10). However, this saturation in one’s own finitude is accompanied by saturation in the very language of illustrative substitution defined by Otto. It denotes a “submergence” of the human organism in the negative language of divine conception and, further, the substitutive crossing-out of their humanity with “nothingness.”

Similarly, James, in considering the “sick soul” as the apex of spiritual ill-health, suggests that the soul’s dread stems from the threat of erasure by the concept of evil:

desperation absolute and complete, the whole universe coagulating about the sufferer into a material of overwhelming horror, surrounding him without opening or end. Not the conception or intellectual perception of evil, but the grisly, blood-freezing, heart-paralyzing



sensation of it close upon one, and no other conception or sensation able to live for a moment in its presence. (162)

For James as for Otto, spiritual malaise involves the soul surrendering its sign-value to a void-concept which obviates all others. Thus, the “sick soul” is accompanied by a breakdown at the level of language, in which the comforting names and conceptions that describe us cease to provide or affirm meaning like they should. At least partially, both the “sick soul” and “creature-feeling” involve an abjection wherein positive language recognises its own wretchedness in the face of what it fails to put into words. For both thinkers then, there is a sharp difference between simply thinking a void-concept and actually apprehending it. The latter requires that language be pushed to its absolute limits; so far, indeed, that all other competing conceptions, even those of the self, must be surrendered as collateral.

In weird fiction there are many cases in which the conceptual force of the unnameable obliterates the conceptions which underpin human experience, the identity of the organism being submerged in a nothingness that is, as Otto says, “wholly other.” Thus, in Lovecraft’s “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” (1941), the narrator describes how a group of sailors, after encountering the inhuman horrors within the sorcerer Joseph Curwen’s subterranean compound, lose a part of themselves to what they have seen, a loss at the heart of self-conception:

Most of them had lost or gained something imponderable or indescribable. They had seen or heard or felt something which was not for human creatures, for to even the commonest of mortal instincts there are terrible boundaries. And from that single messenger the party at the shore caught a nameless awe which almost sealed their own lips. (187-88)

The idea of something unnameable being “lost or gained” here emphasises the transactional nature of “creature-feeling,” the way “nothingness” imprints its value at the level of the positive entity, voiding or “sealing” it in the process. In this way, spiritual horror gives way

to semiotic horror. The unnameable or divine conception marks those who behold it, incorporating them into the shadow of its word by annihilating the signs and conceptions by which they know themselves.

One of the most powerful examples of a “sick soul” experiencing “creature-feeling” occurs in Ligotti’s “The Sect of the Idiot.” The story’s narrator, upon entering a strange and ancient town, finds that the life of his dream-world is inverted, engendering a “feeling of fantastic homelessness amid a vast alien order” which is also “the source of unnameable terrors” (227). The narrator confesses:

I was no more than an irrelevant parcel of living tissue caught in a place I should not be, threatened with being snared in some great dredging net of doom, an incidental shred of flesh pulled out of its element of light and into an icy blackness. In the dream nothing supported my existence, which I felt at any moment might be horribly altered or simply . . . ended. In the profoundest meaning of the expression, my life was of no matter. (227)

This remarkable passage is notable for the way the confessor reduces himself to a series of analogies, variations on insignificance (“I was no more than...”), while simultaneously making finitude itself something gloriously multiform. Nothingness attains a paradoxically positive value, an enveloping nebulousness, at the same time as the voice of human life lets itself recede into anonymity. Naming the unnameable involves a form of reverse-interpellation: Ligotti’s narrator effectively hails himself out of existence by naming that which threatens his existence. In this way, naming the unnameable often involves the human name-giver writing themselves out of their own narrative in obeisance to the void-concept which claims them. Language itself becomes the source of “creature-feeling” at the point where it forces us to confront the arbitrariness of the names and ideas that distinguish us in the universe: the “creature” behind the “I” of the subject.

## Perceiving the Unnameable: Sublimity

It is significant that Otto's language of analogy and substitution, a language which he both affirms and derides, is a "means of linguistic expression drawn from other fields of mental life" (46). These other fields, which Otto refers to as the "natural sphere," include the languages of both art and literature, as he admits when he identifies the ghost story as a debased form of numinous contemplation (16). That Otto describes such aesthetic languages as natural is curious, given that such languages are often non-literal in their concern with mapping the strange or ineffable within sensation. Naming the unnameable in weird fiction can be conceived as a similar kind of aesthetic language, or rather an experience in which all that is unnatural and sublime within language is revealed in the form of an utterance.

In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant talks of the sublime as an intellectual feeling that is opposed to the sensations of beauty aroused by the "forms" within nature; it is, he argues, a feeling of something formless, the apprehension of a force, or a magnitude that surpasses the imagination's ability to grasp it. According to Kant, "in what we call the sublime in nature there is such an utter lack of anything leading to particular objective principles and to forms of nature conforming to them, that it is rather in its chaos that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime, or in its wildest and most ruthless disarray and devastation, provided it displays magnitude and might" (99-100). However, for Kant, the excessive formlessness given in feelings of the sublime does not mean that the imagination halts its attempts to fathom the sublime thing. On the contrary, part of sublime feeling involves the striving of both imaginative thought and human reason against their limits to represent the unrepresentable. "For what is sublime," he argues, "cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which," though they are rendered inadequate in the face of the sublime thing itself, are nonetheless "aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy" (99). The sublime is a void-concept then in that it constitutes a "negative

presentation.” In such a presentation, all possible thought forms are rendered inadequate before the absoluteness of the sublime concept itself. However, the presentation continues because of its inadequacy rather than in spite of it: the ideas of reason continue to lurch and stutter towards an image of the sublime, even though their limitations seem to forbid them to do exactly that.

A significant example of this negative presentation can be found in Poe’s “M.S. Found in a Bottle” (1840). The narrator of the story finds himself abased by the inadequacy of his own reason to account for a particular emotion: “A feeling for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul,” he claims (89). Trapped aboard an impossibly ancient ship as it skirts the edge of a vast whirlpool, the narrator’s feelings are suspended in a moment of sublimity. Here, horror and awe are allowed to co-exist, and even feed off each other:

To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible; yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction. (92-93)

This never-to-be-imparted truth fittingly describes the relationship between the sublime and the weird speech act. Language, like the ship of Poe’s story, hovers on the edge of the abyss, “upon the brink of eternity, without taking a final plunge” (91). And yet, in circling the abyss, language also takes on the taint of the abyssal, momentarily overcoming its own inadequacies as it becomes the vessel for an unnameable transmission. Discussing the Kantian sublime in the context of the weird, Miéville argues that weird fiction’s use of language provides a means for overcoming the gap between the sublime and representation: “The Weird is a radicalized sublime backwash [which] punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime, and allows swillage of that awe and horror from ‘beyond’ back into the everyday”

("Weird Fiction" 511). This backwash is accomplished through the failure of language to adhere to its object, a failure which nonetheless generates its own circular mode of understanding. In other words, the unnameable is reflected not in the attempt to speak of it, but in the vain and contradictory attempt to speak around it. The circular backwash of the unnameable suggests a short-circuiting of language and thought, a schism in which they seem to go against their own logics and normal routines. This schism is exemplified in the Möbian circularity of the narrator's later assertion regarding the ship: "What she is not, I can easily perceive; what she is, I fear it is impossible to say" (89).

Discussing how the Kantian sublime "short-circuits" thinking, Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that it signals human thought in the process of acting out its own limits. "Imagination at the limits of *what* it can present," he writes, "does violence to itself in order to present *that* [which] it can no longer present" (55; original emphasis). Moreover, "[r]eason, for its part, seeks, unreasonably, to violate the interdict that prohibits it from finding objects corresponding to its concepts in sensible intuition" (55). The net effect of the violence afflicting both the imagination and reason is a defiance of the law and the limits of thought: an insolence acted out through the circling of that same limit in language. The sublime, writes Lyotard, is where

thinking defies its own finitude, as if fascinated by its own excessiveness. ... In this regard the sublime feeling is only the irruption in and of thought of this deaf desire for limitlessness. Thinking takes 'action,' it 'acts' the impossible, it subjectively 'realizes' its omnipotence. (55)

Lyotard's interpretation of Kant's formula here is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it helps to elucidate the link between the unnameable and the excessive hyperbole that the weird fiction narrator utters in response to it. The narrator's expressive faculties are not rendered dumb by the unnameable or the sublime. Rather, they are pushed into overdrive in a vain but no less real attempt to overcome their limitations, to enact, and therefore to transcend, the boundaries

of the expressible. In illustrating how one follows on from the other, Lyotard's model allows for the negation of the suspect, initial definition of the unnameable, as something of which nothing can be said or stated. Secondly and relatedly, Lyotard places less emphasis on the inexpressible object, the sight or spectacle that gives rise to the sublime feeling, stressing instead the intense circumlocution of the human response to it. This circumlocution—the sheer volume of words and signifiers used to get around the problem of directly apprehending the sublime object—suggests that such an object is less important than the hyperbole which accompanies it.

Among the many moments of hyperbole in Lovecraft, the following extract from “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936) is particularly notable. Its clotted prose enacts a semiotic frisson between a hesitant near-speechlessness and a zealous attempt to overcome this block on language with more language:

That seething, half-luminous cloud-background held ineffable suggestions of a vague, ethereal beyondness far more than terrestrially spatial; and gave appalling reminders of the utter remoteness, separateness, desolation, and aeon-long death of this untrodden and unfathomed austral world. (270)

Here, language overwhelms its object in reaching an apoplexy of negative presentation. The sensations of fear and awe disappear into the noisy abstraction of the hyperbole used to describe them. In this way, language enacts a double erasure, of the object and of itself, leaving behind the sublime as a synesthetic residue of the carnage. According to Miéville, such “militant adjectivalism” is a “function of sublime backwash” in the weird, and a “struggling against a nounism that implies ... that such unrepresentable Reals are containable in our inadequate symbolic system” (512). Instead of aiming for representation then, the weird's adjectivalism effects a negative presentation: the destruction of the thing at the price of its image. In other words, “[t]he object that occasions the sublime thing disappears,” so

that all that is left are the finite traces of it in the language in which it finds partial expression (Lyotard 76).

In weird fiction, the erasure of the unnameable object is doubly guaranteed by the fleetingness of the glimpses given of it, its tendency to vanish from sight after the initial, terrifying moment of its revelation. The lost object could be said to live on in those utterances that hesitate to speak about it, yet do so. Thus, in Lovecraft's "The Shadow Out of Time" (1936), Nathaniel Peaslee admits that "there is no proof" of his experiences, "for in my fright I lost that awesome object which would ... have formed irrefutable evidence" (156). And yet, the whole of Peaslee's story is itself the phantom echo of that very object, an echo of the unnameable located in the hesitation of his own "definite statement": "What came," he says, "came from somewhere else – where, I even now hesitate to assert in plain words" (157).

Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1845) also deploys hyperbole in the service of naming the unnameable, specifically as an attempt by the narrator to represent to himself the terrifying expression of the eponymous character. In trying to analyse the "meaning conveyed" in his "original survey" of the expression, the narrator finds this task complicated by the novelty of his responses to the face:

there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of extreme despair. I felt singularly aroused, startled and fascinated. (135-36)

Like the sublime then, the unnameable in Poe's story is only firstly, and in a lesser sense, the apprehension of an object or a something. The greater part of it lies in the human faculties of thought and language turning back on themselves, in moebian fashion, to recognise their immobility, to account for it, and then attempt to overcome it. This attempt, doomed to failure, is enacted through the production of a near-unlimited catalogue of nouns, a litany of

names which perform the very limitations of the language they are drawn from. On the subject of hyperbole, Lyotard admits that,

Even as it deploys an unlimited field of proliferating forms before thought, the imagination remains a slave to its finitude, because each of the forms it invents and adds to the others remains limited by definition. (75)

However, at the same time, such limitations, through being put into speech, do effect a performance of the unnameable or the sublime, since the impossibility of their expression is their only comprehensible attribute. “Reflection” on the sublime, Lyotard argues, “thus touches on the absolute of its conditions, which is none other than the impossibility for it to pursue them further” (56).

Consequently, the only thing that can be comprehended about the sublime is that it constitutes its own “absolute of presentation.” Similarly, naming the unnameable stakes out a limit or an absolute frontier of possibility in language, a frontier marked by hyperbole but also equivocation. Such equivocation is evident in Algernon Blackwood’s “The Willows” (1907). In Blackwood’s tale, the narrator and his companion, the Swede, are forced to acknowledge that they are trespassers in the alien world of the willows, and further, that their predicament is at least partially due to the way they have internalised the inherent threat in language. Thus, the Swede affirms, “we’re wiser not to talk about it, or even to think about it, because what one thinks finds expression in words, and what one says, happens” (38). Moreover, earlier in the story, the narrator finds the openness of his own faculties to inconceivable fancy a further terror that compounds the terror of the actual object:

The knowledge that my mind was so receptive to such dangerous imaginings brought the additional terror that it was through our minds and not through our physical bodies that the attack would come, or was coming. (29)



The primary fear in this scene is a fear of thought and language leading its subjects astray, that one ill-timed thought or mis-spoken word could multiply the danger; in other words, a fear that the faculties of thought and speech could potentially be thresholds for alien intrusions. Equivocation, the course of action advised by the Swede, represents the halting attempt to fathom the edges of the unnameable whilst avoiding the dangers of apprehending it directly, a language in fear of itself and its potential.

Clark Ashton Smith's tale "The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis" (1932) represents equivocation around the unnameable in a very different way: this time as the source of the horror rather than, as in "The Willows," protection from it. Specifically, the narrator Rodney Severn invokes equivocation as a terrifying cognitive dissonance—a schism within the forms of thought when confronted with the unnameable's living contradiction:

It was then that the ultimate horror, the beginning madness, came upon me. Amid the crawling revulsion, my nausea-prompted desire to flee from that seething cavern-mouth, there rose an abhorrently conflicting impulse to return; ... to go down where men save they, the inconceivably doomed and accursed, had ever gone; to seek beneath that damnable compulsion a nether world that human thought can never picture. (172)

Severn is clearly among the "sick-souls" invested with Otto's "creature-feeling," in that his primary fear is of a concept, a sign or a thought-form that seems to blot out all the others that distinguish him in the universe. His admission here is that the "ultimate horror" was not, in fact, an object—the revelation of the brain-sucking alien life-forms lurking within the vaults—but the "abhorrent conflict" of his own mental faculties. The horror is a result of equivocal thought and language generating their own form of negative presentation, "that [which] human thought can never picture." Further, the hideous ambivalence of Severn's impulses is redolent of what Lyotard describes as the paroxysmal strain that sublime feeling engenders in its witness. "Thought," he says, "forbids itself the absolute, much as it still wants it," and this

moment of disavowal and desire engenders “a kind of spasm” in which the sublime “exposes the “state” of critical thought when it reaches its extreme limit” (56). In similar fashion, Severn’s creature-feeling can be conceived, literally and figuratively, as a spasm within language: a *mise en abyme* in which the limits that separate two actions—forbidding and avowing—are enacted as a single action.

I have stated that naming the unnameable is an act within language, a total speech act in which several seemingly opposed actions—naming, un-naming, describing, negating—are accomplished simultaneously. What I have subsequently argued, however, is that it is also experiential, an experience of the limits of language in the very process of their being enacted. Thus, the unnameable can be viewed as a special kind of linguistic performance. Its enunciation involves a set of sensations which are both part of the act yet serve also to magnify its force, a circularity in which feeling and function are conjoined. In this way, weird fiction’s exploration of limits in the context of naming proceeds from an implicit acceptance that language is something felt, a force which oscillates from meaning to non-meaning, and back again.

### Performing the Unnameable: J. L. Austin and the “Self-stultifying” Speech Act

So far, I have been using the unnameable as an umbrella term for a series of actions taking place within the framework of a larger speech act, one whose structures are tied to the mechanisms of language itself rather than any external object or referent. I would like here to develop this line of argument further by examining how naming the unnameable relates to a theory of language that privileges the rhetorical force of the spoken or written utterance. J. L. Austin’s theory of the speech act or performative, in which rules are determined by action and effect rather than by representation, have been widely influential since his seminal *How*

*to do Things with Words* was published in 1962. Austin's theory provides a fascinating and rigorous method for understanding how naming the unnameable can be both the failure of one action and, nearly simultaneously, the accomplishment of another.

However, weird fiction's treatment of the unnameable allows also for a critique of Austin's theory, specifically in the way the language to which he applies it seems, at times, to slip away from it. Problems with Austin's theory, and in particular its inability to offer a complete picture of how performative language works, have previously been noted by others. In particular, the efforts of J. Hillis Miller (see *Tropes, Parables, Performatives* from 1991), and Paul de Man have justly been described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as "deconstructive "performativity" for the way they examine aporias at the heart of Austin's thesis (*Touching, Feeling* 7). The deconstructive methods of Miller and de Man take as a starting point the internal disjunction between cause and effect—or, rather, *reference* and *force*—found in the Austinian performative. De Man in particular has noted that many speech acts are marked by the "radical estrangement" between their cognitive and performative components: the meaning of the utterance often fails to connect to, or else is completely at odds with, its intended rhetorical force (*Allegories of Reading* 298). The weird speech act dramatises the aberrant relation it sets up between its meaning and its action: the rhetorical force of its utterance is, in nearly every case, overcoded by the referential obliqueness of the word "unnameable." As I shall demonstrate, this over-determination of action by a problematic reference or meaning makes the weird speech act, in Austin's terms, a "self-stultifying" performative. As Austin argues, such utterances are undermined by an incongruity in their very structure:

Just as the purpose of assertions is defeated by an internal contradiction (in which we assimilate and contrast at once and so stultify the whole procedure) the purpose of a

[performative] contract is defeated if we say ‘I promise and I ought not’. This commits you to it and refuses to commit you to it. It is a *self-stultifying procedure*. (51-52; my emphasis)

Austin’s thesis begins with the reasonable assertion that there exists a kind of utterance in language which is distinct from the straightforwardly descriptive, or “constative” statement. It is this utterance which he considers “performative”: an act of speech whose uttering “is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (6). Put more simply, the performative utterance does not describe an action, a state of affairs, or an event, but literally is that action, state, or event. It is the subject of its own enunciation and metonymically enacts the content of its words in the process of putting them into speech. Thus, rather than being subject to the laws normally attributed to constative utterances—that they be either *true* or *false*—the success of a performative utterance is measured by what Austin calls “infelicities.” Performatives are felicitous, or successful, when they “secure uptake”; that is, when their force or impact on an audience accords with a series of recognised conventions underlying the context of the speech situation (139). On the other hand, performatives are *infelicitous*, or fail, when uptake is not secured by the relevant addressee(s). This occurs either when the lack of an appropriate context makes the force of the utterance ineffectual or misunderstood, or when the grammatical or semantic meaning of what is spoken is indecipherable, and would be so under any conditions.

I shall return to the related topics of “uptake” and success/failure later, since it is significant that Austin assumes the entropy of the failed performative is not, in itself, a kind of uptake. Here, it is sufficient to say that the weird speech act problematises Austin’s distinction between performative and constative even while seeming to uphold it. Undoubtedly, naming the unnameable is performative in so far as it implies an act of “naming,” an undertaking which can be carried out in no other way than through the issuing of the naming-utterance. Calling something “unnameable” seems, grammatically at least, to

be an act that is, if not exactly the same, then at least equivalent to the ascribing of a name to a thing or an event. However, in relation to the way Austin characterises the performative as being governed by a certain kind of convention, the unnameable appears more complicated. This is due to the fact that it seems to be determined by two kinds of convention: the ritualised convention of naming *and* the constative convention of describing. For naming the unnameable only conforms to the convention of naming through using, or attempting to use, description as a means of producing the name itself.

In Clark Ashton Smith's "The Devotee of Evil" (1933), the narrator, Philip Hastane, attempts to name a feeling associated with the horror of his predicament through describing its sensations:

My very sense of space was distorted and deformed as if some unknown dimension had somehow been mingled with those familiar to us. There was a feeling of dreadful and measureless descent, as if the floor were sinking beneath me into some nether pit; and I seemed to pass beyond the room in a torrent of swirling, hallucinative images, visible but invisible, felt but intangible, and more awful, more accursed than that hurricane of lost souls beheld by Dante. (44)

This passage appears to be primarily constative and only secondarily, if at all, performative. However, it is crucial that what actually governs our understanding of it is Hastane's earlier, seemingly paradoxical, assertion of his "despair of conveying in language" the "multitude of sensations" that he then goes on to describe (44). In other words, at the same time as Hastane appears to name his feelings through describing them, he is also admitting that the conventions underpinning such descriptive language are here subject to contextual failure. The circumstances in which Hastane finds himself simply do not permit for naming or description to take place, and the performativity of such utterances do not follow on, necessarily, from their context. The weird speech act, in Smith's story, is "self-stultifying"

through being marked by a conventional and contextual disconnect. Hastane's assertion that his feelings are "beyond language" does not commit him in any way to describing and, in the process, naming them; if anything, it commits him to remaining silent on the subject.

To use de Man's phrase, what is evident here is the "radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance" contained in the weird speech act (*Allegories of Reading* 298). As a performative—or, rather, as a performative impersonating a constative—Hastane's utterance presents an enactment of the failure of its two conventional underpinnings. The dual attempt to identify the feeling and to describe its sensations is ultimately voided, undermined by the performance of their actor. But such a failure should not be considered an Austinian infelicity; on the contrary, the strategic nature of such failure is part of the show of the performance, its theatricality and therefore its paradoxical success. Naming the unnameable thus effects a transition from the constative to the performative. It begins life as an attempted constative description that, in the moment of its failure to secure uptake, finds a measure of success through performing what it fails to do. The nameable and the describable become *the* unnameable and the indescribable through having the conventional rituals of their performativity destabilised within the performance itself.

In "The Willows," this transition from constative to performative governs the dialogue between the narrator and the Swede. Finding themselves on the threshold of a hostile and alien world, both men are induced—after a series of unexplainable and menacing occurrences—to put their feelings of incomprehension into words. The narrator, for his part, attempts to rationalise their situation through the use of a discourse based on reason, using constative description to explain away his own irrational feelings of displacement. When the Swede refuses to accept the constative truth of such explanations, the narrator reproaches him in less than convincing fashion: "don't keep pretending you hear things," he complains, "because it only gives me the jumps, and there's nothing to fear but the river and this cursed

old thundering wind” (37). The Swede, however, is alive to the way this seemingly rational, constative explanation fails to carry out its speaker’s intentions, and is merely a verbal pretence masking the narrator’s performance of his own fear:

“‘*You fool!*’ he answered in a low, shocked voice, ‘you utter fool. That’s just the way all victims talk. As if you didn’t understand that just as well as I do! ... The best thing you can do is to keep quiet and try to hold your mind as firm as possible. This feeble attempt at self-deception only makes the truth harder when you’re forced to meet it.’” (“The Willows” 38; original emphasis)

The uptake secured by the Swede here is an awareness of how the narrator’s description has failed in its goal to account for the unnameable, and has instead revealed its speaker’s sense of creature-feeling in the shadow of the unnameable world of the willows. The narrator is forced to conclude that his attempted constative was undermined by an overly histrionic performative: “My little effort was over, and I found nothing more to say,” he admits, “for I knew quite well his words were true and that *I* was the fool not *he*” (38; original emphasis). Consequently, what was initially conceived as a constative description or explanation shows itself to be a disguised performative, a speech act that dramatises, *in cognito*, the feelings of terror associated with the unnameable.

### Locutionary Enigmas: Critiquing Austin

The self-stultification of the weird speech act has further consequences for Austin’s theory, even as he moves away from a simple opposition between constative and performative utterances. Austin was aware of the tendency for the constative to fade into the performative (and vice versa), noting “clear cases where the very same formula seems sometimes to be an explicit performative and sometimes to be a descriptive, and may even trade on this ambivalence” (78). While he alters his theory to account for such cases, the weird speech act

and its species of estrangement could be said to survive these alterations, and arguably stand even more starkly illuminated by them.

In the second part of *How to do Things with Words*, Austin focuses on the degrees of performativity contained in the total speech act. This total speech act, while still dependent on the securing of felicitous uptake for to be successful, is internally determined by three types of utterances. The first, nominally replacing the constative, Austin calls “locutionary”: an utterance that conveys meaning through being phonetic, grammatical and semantic in character, and which has, for Austin at least, the lowest degree of performativity. The second and third are termed “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” utterances, both of which are closer to being pure performatives in their connoting acts of speech that are governed by force rather than reference. The illocutionary is the “performance of an act *in* saying something,” a conventional kind of performative that includes describing (99; original emphasis). On the other hand, the perlocutionary is a performative that compels and “produces certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or the speaker, or of other persons,” effects that are subsequent to, and not a part of, the original act itself (101).

Initially, naming the unnameable could be said to have the primary character of an illocution, in that it can be performed in no other way than through speech—its object is itself. Indeed, Judith Butler has usefully described the illocutionary speech act as a rhetorical gesture whose performativity lies in its enacting a thing, “doing” it, in the process of signifying it. “Of such an act,” says Butler, “one cannot reasonably ask for a referent, since the effect of the act of speech is not to refer beyond itself, but to perform itself, producing a strange enactment of linguistic immanence” (198). Since the unnameable’s referent, the object which it paradoxically “names,” is always elided by the word itself as a condition of its



meaning, it seems persuasive to read the unnameable according to Butler's terms: a performance of "linguistic immanence" taking place within rhetorical language only.

However, even if the weird speech act can be correctly called an illocution, it is clearly a problematic one. What it draws attention to is the aberrant and contradictory relation between the performative force of naming that it implies, and the confused locutionary content of the weird speech act. Through being marked by this semantic aporia, naming the unnameable also works as a reminder of Austin's own lack of emphasis on the importance of the locutionary to the success of all illocutions. Indeed, the locutionary, that initial semantic moment of an utterance that underpins all elements of its performativity, constitutes something of an absent centre for Austin. Specifically, the locutionary signifies a moment which is always occluded by the force of an illocution, yet continues to haunt it through providing the potential conditions for both its success *and* its failure.

Moreover, the locutionary is closely associated with the element of uptake that, Austin argues, is always the measure of the illocution's success. Indeed, uptake marks the point of transition between the meaning and the force of the utterance, the linguistic threshold through which a locutionary act becomes illocutionary. It is in the moment before this liminal transference, the movement from the reference of the locution to the force and convention of the illocution, that naming the unnameable creates complications. Specifically, the weird speech act secures a unique kind of uptake, one that does not trace a linear pathway from locution to illocution to perlocution, but which deliberately foregrounds the locutionary as its absent centre. It is precisely because the meaning of the unnameable is cloudy, obscuring any sense of reference, that all performances of it are oriented around its obscure locutionary locus, circling it in the vain search for a means of escape. Consequently, the only uptake that can be obtained from this closed circle is the resigned understanding that there is no escape from it, no means of parsing the unnameable's sealed aporia.

Smith's "The Nameless Offspring" (1932) gestures to this locutionary enigma with its title, even as it seemingly depicts the weird speech act securing a straightforward uptake. Lodging overnight in the house of the Tremoth family, Henry Chaldane is driven to inquire about the nature of the family curse, a curse on which he has already been given to speculate after overhearing local gossip. Following the mysterious death of the patriarch John Tremoth, Chaldane asks the manservant Harper, "'What are you afraid of?'" and initially receives only silence in response (20). When Harper finally does give a description of his fear, explaining that it stems from Tremoth's monstrously hybrid son who is imprisoned in the room next to Chaldane, Chaldane's response is marked by both understanding and by speechlessness:

Appalled by this confirmation of my own most repugnant surmise, I could offer no rejoinder, since all comment would have been futile. ... All too readily, I understood the nameless fear that had impelled the old man to request my company. (20-21)

On the surface at least, the performative sequence of this interaction is causally linear. The locutionary content of Harper's illocution (description) secures the uptake of informing Chaldane about the Tremoth's family's tragic history. It also entails the perlocutionary consequence of Chaldane's response, a reaction that, while governed by speechlessness, still seems to be a comprehending one. However, this is a simplified account of the performativity in question. It ignores the interaction between the illocutionary resonances of the act with their locutionary underpinnings and, in the process, it disregards the strange circularity of the speech act performed. In the quotation above, what transpires is yet another kind of self-stultification. Harper's illocutionary act of describing his fear, *and* the perlocutionary consequence of Chaldane's response, are overdetermined by the residue of non-meaning contained in the locutionary act that precedes them.

There is here another example of how the unnameable resembles the iterations of a Möbius strip. Both Harper's confession and Chaldane's reaction fail to get beyond the

unnameable-as-locution. Both performatives remain governed by a locutionary obliqueness, and consequently their force and their uptake also remain chained to it, doomed to reiterate this impossible meaning as the underlying condition of their utterance. Harper's illocutionary performance, or confession, of his own fear cannot escape its locutionary origins; it is only a performance in that it re-enacts and theatricalises this absent meaning, reiterating "the nameless fear" contained at the semantic level. As a speech act, Harper's confession is not simply a revelation of truth; it is also about a failure to confess, a shameful declaration of his own inability to account for something nameless. Thus, the performativity of the scene is couched in the exposure of Harper's guilt, a staging in which language itself becomes a source of shame for the wayward confessor. Further, the unnameable here is doubled by Harper's illocution: the only possible uptake which his performance can achieve is a re-inscription of this "nameless fear" in the response of his audience, a circular understanding in which the unnameable's obscure locution is replicated once more. In this way, the knowledge or uptake gained from Harper's illocution becomes part of the show of the performance, a show whose dramatic force derives from the ambiguity of reference underlying such force. Even in a perlocutionary sense, Chaldane's reaction is overcoded by his speechlessness—it is a response which, in itself, recognises the impossibility of any response other than silence when confronted with the unnameable. In this way, the unnameable locution contravenes the force of both illocution *and* perlocution. Any form of uptake is condemned to echo, through speechlessness, the obliqueness contained in that initial semantic moment.

In his critique of Austin, Jacques Derrida recognises the possibility of a speech act becoming undermined in its attempt to cleanly transmit the totality of a locution and, therefore, to achieve uptake in linear fashion. For Derrida, the communication and dissemination of meaning is necessarily fraught with the possibility of failure, a failure that underscores the very nature of the performative in being either successful or infelicitous.

“The conscious presence of speakers or receivers participating in the accomplishment of a performative,” writes Derrida, “implies teleologically that no *residue* [*reste*] escapes the present totalisation” (“Signature-Sign-Event” 14; original emphasis).

What is implicit in Derrida’s critique is his bringing into focus Austin’s covert substitution of one opposition for another. Specifically, Derrida reveals that the initial binary of constative/performative lives on in the second half of Austin’s argument, conveniently disguised as the oppositional dyad locutionary/illocutionary-perlocutionary. In this way, the further opposition of success/failure, which underpins illocutionary and perlocutionary utterances, is always privileged by Austin above locutionary content. In Austinian terms, the latter is always considered transparent, only liable to confusion through the infelicities to which the more explicitly performative utterances are prone. Austin’s procedure, argues Derrida, involves a disingenuous back-flip:

[It] consists in recognizing that the possibility of the negative (in this case, infelicities) is in fact a structural possibility, that failure is an essential risk of the operations under consideration; then in a move which is almost *immediately simultaneous*, in the name of a kind of ideal regulation, it excludes that risk as accidental” (“Signature-Sign-Event” 15; original emphasis)

The weird speech act could be considered a reversal of the formula implicit in this simultaneous recognition and erasure of failure. Through making failure its performative centre, naming the unnameable reveals failure’s possibility—that is, its potential to occur at all—to be the structural condition of the speech act’s success. By foregrounding failure as the main circuit of the performance *as well as* its uptake, naming the unnameable deconstructs the binary separating success and failure in speech acts.

## The Unnameable and Performativity

Machen's "Novel of the Black Seal" (1895), August Derleth's "The Dweller in Darkness" (1944), and Lovecraft's "The Shadow Out of Time" all contain weird speech acts that engender a feedback loop of stultification. In these stories, characters are trapped between the impassability of the unnameable-as-locution—the unspeakable meaning which governs their fear—and the impossibility of performing any descriptive illocution that doesn't merely reiterate this locution at the level of uptake. Because of this impossibility, these moments are notable for containing little or no actual illocutions. Instead, they seem to revolve around the possibility of such illocutions being performed: virtual performances which are internal to the characters rather than being spoken aloud by them, but which nonetheless generate a circular uptake and force. Rather than making use of explicit illocutions then—an explicitness that is, for Austin, determined by their being performed in the "first person singular present indicative active" (56)—the following examples only refer indirectly to such illocutions. In this sense, they resemble what Sedgwick has termed "performatives," a set of ambiguous utterances that, "though not themselves performatives, ... are *about* performatives and, more properly, cluster around performatives" (69; original emphasis). This circling of explicit performatives through allusion and suggestion not only intensifies the theatricality of the weird speech act; such performatives also "dramatize ... the pathos of uncertain agency" that is crucial to the way naming the unnameable achieves its moebian uptake (76).

In Machen's story, the protagonist Miss Lally, secluded in an isolated homestead in the Welsh backwoods, finds herself in the grip of an unspeakable fear that, because of its unknown nature, seems to allow for no action other than contemplation:

If I knew, I thought, if I knew what there were to dread, I could guard against it; but here, in this lonely house, shut in on all sides by the olden woods and the vaulted hills, terror seems to

spring inconsequent from every covert, and the flesh is aghast at the half-heard murmurs of horrible things. (53)

The periperformativity of this quotation is visible in the way several illocutionary forces are present at once, vying for attention. Through repeating the phrase “if I knew,” Miss Lally is indirectly referring to the role that knowledge of context plays in underscoring the force of an illocution: in this case, the knowledge of the danger that inspires her dread. For Miss Lally, being able to know, and thus to describe, her dread to herself, would constitute a suitable illocutionary response to her predicament through granting her the force of “guard[ing] against it.” However, because the nature of the dread remains unnameable and shrouded from view, the possibility of her guarding against it through a descriptive illocution—i.e. putting it into words—is stymied right away. Thus, what she delivers instead is a different kind of illocution, a description which magnifies her dread rather than diminishing it: a fearful account of the house, woods, and hills that form her immediate surroundings. As well as being illocutionary then, this description also represents a form of uptake secured from the earlier, *periperformative* (and failed) illocution of guarding against her dread. However, this description can only reiterate the senselessness of her dread, in that such dread is replicated “inconsequent from every covert” of her environment. Once again, force and illocution are commandeered by locution and non-reference: they hijack the uptake and make it a circular drama.

A different kind of periperformative circularity is depicted in Derleth’s “The Dweller in Darkness.” Investigating a series of disappearances in a Wisconsin forest, the narrator and his companion find their ability to take decisive action of any kind detained by the unnameable vagueness marking their only piece of evidence—the notes of the lead investigator:

Certain hints and implications lodged between the lines of what Professor Gardner had written were suggestive of terrible, ageless evil, and I felt that there was opening up before Laird Dorgan and myself an adventure so incredible, so bizarre, so unbelievably dangerous that we might well not return to tell it. Yet even then there was a lurking doubt in my mind that we would say anything about what we found at Rick's Lake. (106-07)

In this case, the equivocation marking the “hints and implications” which are suggestive of the unnameable cause a similar level of peripperformative vacillation on the part of the investigators. In “Novel of the Black Seal,” the narrator’s inability to describe away her terror led to her peripformatively reinforcing it. Here, in contrast, the narrator’s hesitancy is motivated by an awareness of the possible dangers that such a description might engender: in other words, the untold effects, recriminations, and negative responses that might be unleashed if the unnameable were to be enacted as an illocution. The public necessity of minimising the uptake of any such performance is what forms the background of the narrator’s “lurking” doubts. It is a doubt that forbids him, at least in his mind, to perform any action that would transgress the unnameable’s shroud of vagueness and secrecy.

However, this unspoken illocution is at least peripformatively visible, given that the thought of it potentially occurring is what governs the uncertain sentiments of the narrator. His response in the extract above “clusters around” the dangerous possibility of such a description becoming explicit. Consequently, the quotation can be viewed as a kind of uptake to an unspoken illocution, a description that while being left unstated still has the peripperformative residue of an act. As Sedgwick notes, “the peripperformative is the mode in which people may invoke illocutionary acts in the explicit context of other illocutionary acts” (79). Moreover, this uptake is once again tied to the “uncertain agency” of the unnameable’s reference. All that the narrator can do, at this point in the story, is to invoke his own inability to go beyond the unnameable locution contained in the Professor’s notes.

The periperformative circling of explicit illocutions also besets Nathaniel Peaslee, the narrator of “The Shadow Out of Time.” On many occasions throughout the tale’s narrative, he attempts to give illocutionary voice to the haunting, locutionary character of his dreams and memories, and so to perform a partial exorcism of them. This, he finds, is impossible because of the way such fleeting impressions are obscured by a locutionary opaqueness that does not permit itself to be transmitted. “I cannot hope to give any true idea of the horror and dread contained in such echoes,” says Peaslee, “for it was upon a wholly intangible quality ... that such feelings mainly depended” (183). He continues:

So seething with baffling hints and images was my mind that all objective matters seemed withdrawn to incalculable distances. Physical sensation was dead, and every fear remained as a wraith-like, inactive gargoyle leering at me. (194)

The sedimentation of negative periperformatives here, marked by their disavowal of any possibility for description, constitutes the narrator’s *dis-embedding* himself from the performative scene. This refusal to be part of a given performance, and to fall in with its conventions, is an aspect of periperformativity that Sedgwick considers among the most “fascinating and powerful” of the phenomenon (70). The locutionary overload of Peaslee’s feelings kills off the possibility to transcend them via the force of an illocution. The moment of locution dampens his descriptive capabilities *and* his physical sensations, those dynamic aspects of human physiology that allow for action of *any* kind to take place. The consequent uptake secured from this implied illocution—the descriptive force of Peaslee’s feelings—lies in his recognition of this performance’s inevitable failure. It also initiates, in the same context, another illocution in which the moment of refusing the role of the describer is periperformatively enacted: “I cannot hope to give any...” As a result, the force of Peaslee’s illocutions, taking place in a periperformative environment, is blunted by a locutionary polysemia: a “seething” voice-scape of “baffling hints and images.” In its periperformative



form then, naming the unnameable constitutes both a refusal to name, but also a reluctant acceptance that naming is unavoidable. The attempt to name must take place, since the stage is already set, occurring if only to shine a mirror on an unfathomable locution.

## Conclusion

Naming the unnameable constitutes a total speech act governed by self-stultification, a moebius strip on which illocutions circle endlessly back around the locutionary value of the act, trying to determine a way beyond it but always failing to do so. The uptake secured from the circulations of such a speech act is not centred on the “force” of the illocution, but rather on the “absent reference” present at the locutionary level of such force. Because of this, the weird speech act is inscribed, at every level, with performative failure.

This failure, however, does not signal the failure of the performance as a whole: on the contrary, it remains, as ever, the marker of its success. The unnameable, in bringing together the value of locution, illocution, and perlocution (like the conjunction of noun, verb, and adjective before it) constitutes a total speech act, but a liminal one. It is an act that is always undertaken on the transitive threshold between force and reference, description and action, and even success and failure. As such, it shares a certain birthmark with the other liminal, non-categorisable performatives that Austin glosses over, such as joking, swearing, and expressing one’s attitude or feelings. Above all, it resembles the non-literal use of insinuation, another performative marked by a disjunction between what is said and what is achieved, the literal meaning of the utterance and its effect.

Like insinuation, which it so often includes, naming the unnameable is a performance on the edge of language, on the rim of all that it makes possible, and, further, a theatricalization of the very infelicities to which language is prone. As such, it can never be simply stated, but can exist *only as* performance, the performance of certain rules and

conventions in the process of their stultification. Additionally, such liminal speech acts are endemic in literary language: for Austin, “aetiologies” that are always marked by a strategic infelicity, and thus a co-dependence between failure and success. It is therefore appropriate that literature, and in particular weird fiction, should provide the medium for the performance of the unnameable, since the efficacy of its performance rests on its being communicated in an idiom that makes its interstitial nature understandable. Weird fiction, in testing out the limits of everyday conventional language, allows for such exploratory performances to occur, without the risk of their sliding into confused obscurity.

## **Chapter 3**

# **The Reading Room at the End of the Universe: The Library as Weird Chronotope**

The universe (which others call the Library)

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of  
Babel," 78

My emphasis to this point has been on the performative lacunae of weird fiction, the often circuitous speech effects which catch language in the act of abjuring its own rules. My analysis of the weird speech act has been primarily independent of contextual considerations, taking into account variations in the act's performance—the many ways it can be phrased—while setting aside the question of how space and setting might alter the nature of the act. However, the extent to which weird fiction critiques reality as an effect of language is also dependent on the mode's engagement with space, and specifically with settings which modify speech acts by introducing their own rules for speaking, writing, and living. The ideologies of a given space (the home, the town, the bookshop, etc.)—the kinds of rules and discourses which determine coded norms for spatial interaction—are frequently held as objects for interrogation in weird fiction. As aspects of artificial consensus realities, which are far less secure than they seem, such ideologies are shown as liable to collapse under repeated questioning. When collapses occur at the ideological level in weird fiction, the space formerly governed by that ideology takes on a hint of the malign. Spaces that once reflected an ordered vision of the cosmos suddenly become unsafe, hives of disorder rather than refuges from it.

Weird fiction's engagement with ideologically encoded spaces, and particularly the way the weird challenges the often arbitrary logics of such spaces, forms the next stage of my

argument. In the following chapter, I examine a setting which is both a site of and a symbol for the world of knowledge that is called into question throughout the weird mode. This setting is the library. Throughout its many appearances in weird tales, it functions as both space and also as metaphor. The library is first and foremost a prototypical space of action in the weird, a site containing the signposts to weird knowledge and the attainment of forbidden or occult secrets. Visitations to libraries often present a crucial pivot for the plotting of weird tales, a suitably generic locus from which to bring the strange or supernatural to the fore. In Clark Ashton Smith's "The Return of the Sorcerer" (1931), for example, the library of the Satanist scholar John Carnby is the atmospheric locale which moves the narrator to corroborate his feelings of discomfort in Carnby's presence: it was "the dark library in which he received me as much as the man himself—a room whose musty shadows could never have been wholly dissipated by sun or lamplight" (27). Further, in Margaret Irwin's weird-inflected tale of middle class decline "The Book" (1930), the family library is the point of emergence for the demonic energies that lead the patriarch, ultimately, to murder and madness. And, in a more recent and unorthodox example, T. E. D. Klein's novella "The Events at Porothe Farm" (1972), the narrator Jeremy, an academic in the field of supernatural and horror fiction, carries his portable library of *fin de siècle* syllabus texts with him in the boot of his car as he travels to the farm of the title for a writing retreat. For Jeremy, the library is mobile—its books casually transportable in the boot of his car—and an intellectual refuge from the quotidian company of his hosts, the Porothe family. However, this transportable library carries with it its own dangers, which become a reality later in the story. There is the implication that Jeremy's reading of and critical commentary on the texts in his library (of which there are many asides) is somehow having a malignant supernatural effect on the laws of his own world. The subsequent inference is that reading too complacently from

a library—even a library with which one is extremely familiar—has the potential to alter, and even infect, the world beyond its pages.

However, as well as its spatial and plot-related significance in these examples, the library in each case has a metaphorical value. Specifically, the library supplies weird fiction with a symbolic framework whose nature is transformative, allowing for a drastic reframing of what the library stands for by the end of the stories. Thus, in “The Return of the Sorcerer,” the library as a space of prospective employment for the narrator—a world of bookish research to which he is well accustomed—undergoes a troubling slippage. Specifically, it loses its heuristic lines of homeliness, decaying into something described as no better than a “pallor” mottling both the books and their librarian (“[t]he pallor of the library was on his hollow, clean-shaven cheeks”) (27). This metamorphosis from a haven to a charnel house of knowledge climaxes when the narrator opens one of the books—an original Arabic edition of Lovecraft’s grimoire the *Necronomicon*—to be confronted by an “odor” of “physical decay, as if the book had lain among corpses in some forgotten graveyard and had taken on the taint of dissolution” (29). In Smith’s story then, the library becomes the spatial correlate of degeneration and “dissolution,” the “taint” of which marks both book and researcher as objects of the grave. The rules for abiding in the library, the ideologies that the narrator has internalised as part of his previous library experience, lose their familiarity in assuming morbidly esoteric dimensions.

In Irwin’s “The Book,” the family library is, in reality, a ramshackle collection, a badly curated assortment of books from different eras and levels of readability: it gives the illusion of orderliness and domestic serenity, but is in reality the nest of an inherited evil little suspected by its users. Mr. Corbett uncovers from the library’s upper shelves a hidden sheaf of manuscripts documenting the traffic between his dead uncle and a demon of great power. The effect on the library of these forbidden relics is to make its books literally unreadable,

somehow abhorrent and obscene to the sensibilities of the family members. Not only is the illusion of order in the library effaced by this infiltrator; it also disrupts and threatens the conjugal bliss and stability of the household, as Mr. Corbett becomes compelled by the demon he summoned through reading to commit the most unthinkable acts of domestic violence and cruelty. Once again, the library metaphor shifts from representing order in the home, to stand for a cradle of disorder and mayhem, transforming the world of the story as it is itself transformed *by* the story.

Further, in “The Events at Poroth Farm,” Jeremy’s library attains a terrifyingly new symbolic significance once transported to the Farm. Formerly the consummate librarian and expert reader of the collection in his charge, Jeremy’s authority over the library is thwarted when both he and the books are removed from their natural environment. In the backwoods town of Gilead, a haven for Amish superstition, the library becomes an arcane repository for Jeremy’s unwitting incantations. Specifically, his recitation of passages from certain books leads to their contents echoing nightmarishly in reality. A notable example of this metalepsis, the transformative interaction between different textual realities within narrative (books within books), takes place when Jeremy comes to read Arthur Machen’s classic weird tale “The White People” and its intimations of forbidden “scarlet ceremonies.” The narrative of Klein’s tale gives credence to the idea that Jeremy is somehow possessed by the intertextual spirits of his library, in having him, at a crucial moment in the story, perform “signs to the woods and the moon” in a manner reminiscent of the ceremonies in Machen’s tale (320). In having subsequent events spiral beyond the control of its symbolic librarian-character, the tale represents the library as the source of an inexplicable disorder. However, on the level of metaphor, the library also represents the principle of such disordering phenomena. It comes to stand for the emblem of a weird epistemology, in which books run counter to what we expect of them, obscuring and transforming meaning rather than illuminating it.

In each of the above examples the library is the focal point for the disruption of authority and the rules on which that authority rests. Ideologies of homeliness, bourgeois domesticity, and readerly expertise are all negated as the result of contact with a malign influence pervading libraries. This negation is unexpected, given that the libraries in each story were assumed by their users to bolster such ideologies of authority. As I discuss in more detail below, the double-sidedness of libraries reflected in these stories has its roots in a very real anxiety regarding the function of libraries in the world. While libraries have long stood for an idealist Alexandrian framework of total knowledge and accessibility, they are at all times disorderly creations in reality, prone to slipping into confusing disarrangement the more one examines them. Walter Benjamin, in his highly personal account of his own obsession with book collecting “Unpacking My Library,” observes that the library is constantly threatened by what its perfectly arranged shelves conceal, “[f]or what else is a collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as an order?” (60). Benjamin’s point is that library fictions, the narratives of ordered and accessible arrangement that seem to accompany libraries as spaces, are human projections: there is nothing natural or necessary about such narratives, apart from what human habit and custom have imparted to the space over time.

In his seminal history of libraries and library fascination, *The Library at Night*, Alberto Manguel goes further, arguing that the idealist conception of the library flies in the face of the “main features of our universe,” that is, “its dearth of meaning and lack of discernible purpose” (3). “And yet,” he continues,

with bewildering optimism, we continue to assemble whatever scraps of information we can gather in scrolls and books and computer chips, on shelf after library shelf, whether material, virtual, or otherwise, pathetically intent on lending the world a semblance of sense and order, while knowing perfectly well that, however much we’d like to believe the contrary, our pursuits are sadly doomed to failure. (3)

For Manguel, the project of assembling libraries is subject to an intense anxiety. This anxiety moves to the fore when we encounter libraries in all their vast materiality. In such moments, divested of the human desire towards world building through accumulation of knowledge, the inanimate object-hood of books becomes a source of horrifying oppression:

No one stepping for the first time into a room made of books can know instinctively how to behave, what is expected, what is promised, what is allowed. One may be overcome by horror—at the clutter or the vastness, the stillness, the mocking reminder of everything one doesn't know, the surveillance—and some of that overwhelming feeling may cling on, even after the rituals and conventions are learned, the geography mapped, the natives found friendly. (4-5)

The ontology of the library that emerges once its ideals fall away is one of disquiet, an unease that finds its double in the anxiety of being in the world at large. Like the world for which it often forms a symbolic correlate, the library contains shadows of the unknown and the unknowable. There is a fear that its corridors of erudition are not fully mapped, and never will be, and that human browsing is somehow pointless, overwhelming, or even taboo in the face of such immensity. “Indistinct, majestic, [and] ever-present,” Manguel continues, “the tacit architecture of that infinite Library continues to haunt our dreams of universal order” (24).

Weird fiction that deploys the library as a key site of action is always tugging at the metaphorical and ideological implications of libraries in the world: the hierarchies of knowledge and order they underpin and what they stand for. The weird library is never a site that is neutral towards the idealist discourse of libraries in general. It always speaks directly to that discourse, challenging and critiquing it at the same time, throwing its pleasant fictions into disarray through its mechanisms of horror. As the metaphor of the ideal library breaks down, so too does the site itself. In each of the stories above, the library's inability to support



a world schema takes the form of a monstrous transformation, in which the site of the library becomes a portal for the intrusion of dark forces that annihilate any perceived law and orderliness. In failing to symbolically reflect the benign ideal of total knowledge, the site of the weird library instead comes to reflect the inverse: a corpus whose scattered and rotten texts cause meaning itself to decay into horrifying and unexpected codes.

My contention that library-as-site and library-as-metaphor share a mutually transformative connection in the weird has its origin in the arguments of narrative theorist Peter Brooks. “Narrative,” he argues, is always the “acting out of implications of metaphor,” in which the latter begins life in “an inactive, ‘collapsed’” state, before being processed by narrative “enactment” in a “reactivated, transactive” form (26; 27). In other words, “in the case of every narrative ... there must be enactment in order to produce transformation: the plotting-out of initial givens ... so that their uses may be transformed ... both spatially ... and temporally” (26; 27). Additionally, Brooks’s insistence that the transformation of metaphor by narrative occurs along both spatial and temporal coordinates suggests something crucial about the library, in terms of its generic significance for weird fiction. That is, the transformation of the library—from a static, or “collapsed” metaphor for ordered knowledge, to a transactive metaphor for the corruption of that principle of order—appears to be *chronotopic* in character.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope has long been a valuable conceptual tool for isolating and cataloguing the formal properties of time and space as represented in different types of narrative genres. For Bakhtin, the “literary artistic chronotope” is a composite of “spatial and temporal indicators ... fused into one carefully thought out, concrete whole” (84). This fusion, or “intersection of axes” is articulated in almost bodily terms as a thickening of time, in which it “takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible,” while “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” and so on (84).

In my view, the library constitutes a special kind of chronotope for weird fiction, in that its time-space represents a direct thematic engagement with time and space as figures of worldness. That is, the weird library chronotope is not simply demonstrative of an intersection of spatial and temporal planes; it also constitutes an interpretation of the logic and stability of those planes or constituents of a possible world.

For what is the library if not a commentary on the vagaries of space and time, on the diachronic movements of history, and the plotting of that history in space? In an article examining the social function of libraries in M. R. James's ghost story "Mr. Humphreys and His Inheritance" (1911), Penny Fielding notes that "the library aspires to a condition of expansion, plenitude, or even completion," a condition whose project is ultimately unsustainable. She goes on,

The library is both space and system ... the users of the library are those capable of understanding its texts, but as those texts constitute the whole world, its readers are an epistemological repository for *all* knowledge of the world. The space of the library is contained, yet timeless, and the systems it generates are all geared to preservation of the collection-as-world. (756; original emphasis)

Insofar as it represents an idealistic engagement with space and time, the library constitutes a vision of the world, an image that it not only reflects but seeks also to improve upon through preservation and expansion. However, for Fielding as for Manguel, "the library's mnemonic function is illusory, its status as the bearer of history leads, literally, to nothing" (768). In James's story, Mr. Humphreys inherits a country mansion with two notable features: a vast library, and an overgrown maze. The arc of the narrative involves a deliberate correlation and metaphorical slippage between the two structures. Specifically, Humphreys is continually distracted in his efforts to preserve and itemise the library's collection by the lure of exploring the maze, and discovering its elusive centre. Ultimately, library and maze turn out

to be mirrors of the other: each proves to be a different pathway towards encountering the same decentring and demonic forces—the long forgotten practices of a devil-worshipping ancestor, and the real inheritance alluded to by the title. As Fielding correctly notes, “[t]he maze is the library’s evil twin: while the library openly displays its aspiration to order by providing shelf-mark sign posts, the maze lures us in with its promise of a hidden order there for us to discover if we can” (768). In James’s story, this “hidden order” is a law of deliberate misdirection. Both structures—library and maze—conjoin metaphorically as an epistemological labyrinth, misdirecting Humphreys away from the arms of knowledge and ownership, and into the jaws of an abiding evil that, tellingly, reveals itself by burrowing out of Humphreys’s hand-drawn map of the maze. The hole formed in the map by the thing (“It took shape as a face—a human face—a *burnt* human face”) is symbolically redolent of China Miéville’s comments concerning the hole-riddled “worldweave” of the weird (1115). Any human schema or map of world-ness, like the library, is always threadbare whilst appearing structurally secure. The untimely revelation of the holes in such “maps” is often represented as being as terrible as the things that crawl out of them, in that holes expose the fallibility of human attempts to plan and map over them (“...so this hole seemed to Humphreys for the moment the only thing in the world”) (355).

The precariousness of the library’s ideal image is thus revealed to be the result of a double-ness afflicting the original metaphor itself. Libraries are governed by an essential dualism, in that they are oriented towards life and death, order and disorder simultaneously. On the one hand, they represent the urge towards preservation and survival, providing an edifying substitute for the world in which they exist. On the other, they are a textual cemetery, a temple-archive housing the remains of obsolete or forgotten knowledge, which always haunts the established order, threatening it with dissolution or contradiction. The volumes of a library are not geared towards the discovery of any univocal telos. On the

contrary, the sedimentation of books and knowledge over time has the effect of negating any single voice or cohesive narrative, reducing it to a garble of contesting theses, arguments layered upon counter-arguments as old knowledge is replaced with the new. This garble of many voices speaking out of time is in accord with Bakhtin's own philosophy. As Holquist, points out, for Bakhtin "there is no one meaning being striven for: the world is a vast congeries of contesting meanings" in which "no single term capable of unifying its diversifying energies is possible" (24). In this sense, the library chronotope in weird fiction is an explicit engagement with the world as a "congeries of contested meanings." As I will demonstrate, the weird library is an exemplary figure of Bakhtinian dialogism, in that it makes visible the "two contending tendencies that impinge upon the formation of meanings: stabilizing (centripetal) forces and destabilizing (centrifugal) ones" (Lawson 388). Fluctuating between the centripetal, which unifies meaning and language, and the centrifugal, which decentralizes it, the weird library is at all times a conduit for horrifying transformations. As a chronotope, its time-space is metamorphic, a haunted zone "where the knots of the [weird] narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin 250).

The dialogical two-faced-ness of the library in terms of metaphor is echoed at the level of spatial setting as represented by weird fiction. As I have suggested, the spatial value of the library chronotope in weird narratives is to provide a plot pivot for a horrifying transformation, usually at the expense of a reader-character as they learn of the disorder masked by the library's placid façade. The following chapter proceeds from an engagement with the near-schizophrenic dialogism of the weird library chronotope, as it rotates from order to disorder along both spatial and temporal axes at once. The library's size and geography is never static in the weird: its forms are diverse, ranging from the public library in Ramsey Campbell's "The Franklyn Paragraphs" (1973), to Lancelot Canning's nightmarishly completist private collection of Poe memoranda in Robert Bloch's "The Man Who Collected

Poe” (1951), and the strangely sentient secret library in Zoran Zivkovic’s “The Library” (2002) which has predicted and mapped out the entirety of past, present, and future. In nearly every case however, the library begins life as a recognisable space-time, with its rules and orders of conduct, before revealing its non-Euclidean angles, the hidden weirdness behind its metaphor. According to Bakhtin, narrative chronotopes always entail an evaluative engagement with their counterparts in reality. As Michael Holquist argues, citing Bakhtin, chronotopes are never simply “devices ... cut off from the cultural movements in which they arise” (253). On the contrary, there is always a symbiosis linking the chronotopes of world and work, to the point where the representational capability of the literary chronotope “provides a means to explore the complex, indirect, and always mediated relation between art and life” (Holquist 111). As such, the weird library chronotope is always geared towards critiquing the discourses and wish-fulfilment fantasies that we, its readers, idealistically project into it.

### Malevolent Demiurgi: “The Library of Babel”

The work of Jorge Luis Borges has only recently become the subject of weird fiction criticism. While the addition of Borges to the canon of weird authors can be chiefly credited to his ambivalent Lovecraft homage (or, arguably, parody) “There Are More Things” from the 1975 collection *The Book of Sand*, Borges’s oeuvre also chimes with the weird’s fixation on horrific semiosis. In “Reading Lovecraft at the End of the World,” J. Andrew Brown argues that Borges’s seminal short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” “hangs its structure on Lovecraft’s tried and true story line, wherein investigation of occult texts reveals hidden horrors almost perfectly” (182). While “Tlön...” theorises a form of spatial reality derived from the words of a text, “The Library of Babel” arguably goes further, using the library’s textually inscribed dimensions to sketch out an ontology based on fear and failure. “The

Library of Babel” deals explicitly with the ideological dimensions of the library, and the metaphor for a transparently accessible world of knowledge that libraries never quite manage to reflect. Specifically, story’s eponymous library as a world unto itself, a warren of interconnecting passageways and “hexagonal galleries” lined with books, no volume of which is identical to any other. All books are at all times available for reading by the many librarian-denizens of this library as universe. However, while the librarians need only visit a new gallery for the discovery of new knowledge, this level of accessibility does not equate to real freedom. On the contrary, the Library of Babel’s appearance of infinity is, we are told, a source of profound anxiety for its inhabitants. Promising truth and revelation at every turn, the library overwhelms its librarians with a surfeit of potential telos, an indefinite number of realities all of which may be equally true or equally absurd. Additionally, while it possesses the entirety of all knowledge on its shelves, the library is entirely bereft of organisation, lacking any catalogue that could map or make sense of its wonders. The story’s unnamed narrator, an elderly librarian jaded by the endless search for the “catalogue of catalogues,” relates a history of the search for truth in the library as a litany of disappointments and catastrophes (“Let me be outraged and annihilated, but for one instant, in one being, let Your enormous library be justified”) (84). Tellingly, the metaphorical light radiated by an infinite knowledge is here reduced to the hazy phosphorescence of reading lamps, which are completely inadequate to the task (“The light they emit is insufficient, incessant”) (78).

In many ways, Borges’s parable represents another engagement with the co-extensive discourses of libraries and labyrinths. However, in contrast to “Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance,” where the library and the maze are distinct spaces, “The Library of Babel” admits of no distinction between the two, spatially or metaphorically. Rather than simply running parallel, here they actually conjoin: for Borges, library and labyrinth are spatial perspectives for beholding the universe, perspectives that are likely to shift into and out of

each other depending on where one is standing. Further, each is oriented towards the discovery of a mythical centre, a median from which all knowledge is visibly ordered.

Orientation towards discovery, however, does not entail its fulfilment. Borges's library remains poised on the edge of the discovery of a centre: its innumerable hexagons, galleries and books all suggest possible pathways for a mappable course to the centre without ever delivering on their promise. In the shadow of such excess, the library seems claustrophobic, a space oppressively airless in its apparent perfection, lacking any aberration or exit. In this light, the "classic dictum" noted by the narrator, that "[t]he Library is a sphere whose exact centre is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible," is perversely ironic (79). While the centre of the library is theoretically anywhere, unbarred by any door or lock, this makes the idea of centre itself only a matter of perspective, an illusion that changes its form depending on who the librarian is, which field of learning they come from, and which hexagonal "world" they occupy. The library is a prison then insofar as it keeps its librarians locked in the same inevitable toil: an indefinite number of possible centres whose totality must be mapped, while the "circumference"—a potential way out of the labyrinth and its ceaseless reiterations—remains permanently sealed off from them.

Thus, from the start, Borges's tale interrogates idealistic representations of perfectly ordered space. The narrative resembles a diary from a penal colony; its librarians are born into service to the library, living their whole lives in the shadow of its elusive centre, and dying there none the wiser. And yet, despite such traumas, belief in the ideal remains strong among the population. As one of the many inmates of this library as prison, the narrator hopefully describes the flawless symmetry of library as though cataloguing it might spark an epiphany, or open a means of egress:

The universe (which others call the library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries ... one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors ... The distribution of the galleries is invariable. (78)

Palpable here is the narrator's weariness with infinity, both spatial and temporal, or at least the illusion of infinity. There is the suggestion, perhaps another consolatory myth cultivated by the librarians, that the library might be finite, that its schema may have either an end or a beginning. This suggestion arises in part from the presence of a mirror in the hallways of every gallery, "a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances"; such "illusory duplication," it is implied, would be unnecessary if the library were indeed infinite and eternal. However, the narrator, idealistic despite himself, remains keen to accept the mirror as a symbolic covenant of actual infinity: "I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite," he avers (78). Consequently, the hypothetical infinity of the library is a source of much ambivalence for its librarians. Caught between two competing desires—to preserve the richness of infinity's mystery, or to locate themselves within its secret and final doctrine—it is as though the librarians are held in abeyance before the mirror, waiting for something to happen.

The covenant or promise symbolised by the mirror represents the first and most important dimension of time in the story's library chronotope. The library emerges as prison-house built on the faith of its own prisoners, or, more particularly an implicit loyalty to its symbol of promise that survives even the most radical cataclysms. While the library's existence might seem a product of chance, its time-space is, for the librarians who live it, still geared towards finding on its shelves an explanation for its existence. Much of the library's history is marked, relates the narrator, by the search for "the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe and retained prodigious arcana for his future" (82). In this sense, just as the library is mirrored by the



labyrinth, the actual mirror finds its symbolic correlate in the book, a textual speculum that reflects not merely the image of the man in space (as does the mirror), but vindicates the truth and meaning of their acts in time as well.

Consequently, history in the library derives from fealty to a promise of the infinite, and every historical period noted in the story proceeds directly from this promise as a focal point of both faith and crises of faith. Different eras within the library's history are, as noted by the narrator, identified by their stance towards interpreting the library's sacred doctrine in ways either dogmatically conservative or anarchic ("A blasphemous sect suggested that the searchers should cease and that all men should juggle letters and symbols until they constructed, by an improbably gift of chance, these canonical books") (83). Moving from consensus to violent schism and civil war, the time of the library is cyclical, oscillating inexorably between the two human responses—a renaissance optimism ("All men felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure") and a dark ages nihilism ("Epidemics, heretical conflicts, peregrinations which inevitably degenerate into banditry, have decimated the population")—to the problem it sets up (82; 85). The library chronotope in Borges's tale, therefore, emphasises the stake people have in investing chronotopes with religious significance, making space and all of its objects into symbolic monuments to time, and the hoped-for truth that time will reveal. Clark and Holquist define this dimension via Bakhtin as "Platonic time," a form of biographical time that charts "the life course of one who seeks true knowledge" (285). In the Platonic time of the library,

[s]pace is symbolic, and features such as height and length are indicators not only of distance but also of conceptual difficulty and progress toward the truth. Such texts [that make use of Platonic time] usually contain a conversion experience (285)

Temporally framed by progress towards a hidden ideal, and the many conversion experiences accompanying this indefinite narrative of progress, Borges's library holds out its promise of

truth like a lure. It is this Platonic element of the library chronotope that represents the centripetal aspect of its dialogism. The myth-cycles that the librarians have accumulated over centuries to explain the existence of the library, and their imprisonment within it, exemplify the “[t]he fixative power of ... centripetal forces” (Holquist 146). According to Holquist, the centripetal pull within the dialogism of the chronotope stratifies human experience of reality, allowing its narrative to be told in a more or less coherent order: the centripetal thus “enables sense to be made out of the flux of experience” (146). However, such centripetal cosmic narratives are always fabrications, a discursive foreground ordering of a background chaos that cannot be masked forever. Holquist qualifies his reading of centripetal forces in Bakhtin by admitting “the authority that enables such fixity is not real,” and that “systematic claims to stability never exist as a given” (147). Instead, he argues, “their existence must always be made up, conceived” against a background of “heteronomous effects”: the “variety, change” and fluctuation of the centrifugal (147).

Given the precarious position centripetal narratives occupy in augmenting experience for humans, the Library of Babel’s chronotope is always threatened by the possibility that its mask of idealism may slip, and that its promise of the infinite may be deferred without warning. This is due to the fact that the library’s books themselves constitute its centrifugal component, the textual background of flux and dispersal which fractures any attempt to “formulate a general [centripetal] theory of the Library” (80). Like the tower of many tongues alluded to by the story’s title, the “formless and chaotic nature of almost all the books” continually vitiates the librarians’ many quests to derive a univocal mythos of truth and revelation from the library (80). Although in some cases there are “letters on the spine of each book ... these letters do not indicate or prefigure what the pages will say”; rather, the cover and the title text form a paratextual foreground to the background of “senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles, and incoherences” contained within (79; 80). Further, “the

Library is so enormous that any reduction [via the destruction of books] of human origin is infinitesimal,” since “there are always several hundred thousand perfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma” (83). The resultant effect on the temporal aspect of the library’s chronotope is a halting narrative of partial revelations followed by devastating schisms. The narrator describes sectarian conflicts arising as the result of a “certitude that everything has been written,” the self-immolating frustration that the truth exists somewhere, on some shelf, but is irrecoverably confused with a billion falsities contained in the text of countless pages. As the centripetal quest for knowledge declines into savagery and primitive superstition (“I know of districts in which the young men prostrate themselves before books and kiss their pages in a barbarous manner, but they do not know how to decipher a single letter”), the library’s idealised time-space sinks slowly into its “impious” centrifugal double: a ““feverish Library whose chance volumes are constantly in danger of changing into others and affirm, negate and confuse everything like a delirious divinity”” (84).

However, this two-pronged movement from a Platonic idealism to a fevered chaos does not constitute the final development of “The Library of Babel’s” chronotope however. I would argue that the library’s dialogism extends further, and that navigating its labyrinthine time-space is actually a case of a three-fold passage. Another movement, an almost invisible regression back towards a kind of centre, follows the movement from centripetal to centrifugal. However, crucially, it is a centre corrupted by exposure to the delirious fever that preceded it. Marked now by the negative and confusing forces of “a delirious divinity,” the centre comes to stand for something horrifying, a meaning that dooms the human librarians rather than vindicate them. This third movement is rendered nearly invisible, perhaps, because even the narrator fears that to speak heretically of his anxiety concerning the library’s true function might be to give legitimate credence to a horror too awful to put into words. Instead, the anxiety is hinted at isolated moments in the story, before exploding into

palpable reality by the end. The horror is the possibility that the centre of the library's chronotope might not be a place habitable by humans, that it may instead be an inhuman realm that is antithetical not only to the discourses humans project into the library, but to the survival of human life itself.

Evidence of a movement away from the centrifugal towards a horrific centripetal orientation is given by the narrator's own refutation of the "feverish library" theorem. Castigating the "abominable taste and desperate ignorance" of the impious advocates of the idea, he insists that the texts of the library contain "not a single example of absolute nonsense" (84; 85). Rather, the plenitude of characters in the text is a sign not of "divine disorder" but something worse: a terrifying surplus of undecidable meaning emanating from the library's own secret language, not even a syllable of which can be decoded by humans. The revelation that the library forms a universe in which the common life of librarians is inconsequential exemplifies what Otto defines as "creature-feeling": a sense of being "submerged and overwhelmed by [a] nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (10). "I cannot combine some characters ... [in a way in] which the divine Library has not [already] foreseen and which in one of its secret tongues [does] not contain a terrible meaning," bemoans the narrator, before concluding that "[n]o one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god" (84; 85).

By the end of the story, the narrator is forced to find in favour of an earlier, though little considered speculation, that the library may indeed be the "product of ... malevolent demiurgi" (79). All human efforts to decode and codify, to map the scale of their space according to a discourse of anthropomorphic progress, are merely the result of an elaborate trick played on them by their surroundings. In dialogic terms, the centripetal centre reveals itself to be a black hole, an uninhabitable zone that drives its colonists further towards the

periphery with each passing year. Even the chaos of flux and chance, one can imagine, would be preferable to accepting the reality of an inhuman demiurge for Borges's librarians. However, there are signs given in the text that an extinction level event might be close at hand, and that the black hole at the centre of the library might be expanding. "Perhaps my old age and fearfulness deceive me, but I suspect that the human species ... is about to be extinguished," prophesies the narrator mournfully. However, his greatest fear is that the library will outlive its mortal custodians, that it "will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret" (85). The library's time-space shackles human being in a narrative of extinction, one whose plot can be deferred momentarily but never entirely halted. Arguably then, the story's most haunting image of the library imagines it as anonymously material, a space empty of human beings whose only dialogue is with itself and its books. The story's climactic image of a future library enduring beyond human life cycles lends a chilling significance to an earlier moment of apprehension: "A memory of unspeakable melancholy ... at times I have travelled for many nights through corridors and along polished stairways without finding a single librarian" (81).

This third dialogic movement, in which centripetal and centrifugal dimensions nightmarishly colour each other, is one of the key chronotopic events for weird fiction narratives. All too often, the centripetal framework sought out by seekers of truth in the weird is revealed to be a maw lined with teeth, a death-trap preying on human ardour for a Platonic ideal whilst providing succour to an entirely different order of being. In "The Library of Babel," the library itself constitutes this order of being, a "secret" and "incorruptible" order that nonetheless corrupts the life of its inhabitants on every level, tempting them into their own self-destruction via an endlessly deferred promise of vindication. At the level of metaphor, the story diegetically reflects on the impotence of libraries in the extra-diegetic

world, showing them to be incapable of sustaining the seemingly infinite, heterogenous discourses we project into them. Further, it turns the relatively static metaphor of the library as an anxiety-prone analogue of perfect order into something nightmarishly transactive. In Bakhtinian terms, the library's inability to fulfil its promise of infinity in the real world is, in the chronotope of the story, carried to a point where centripetal and centrifugal narratives monstrously congeal. In the weird library chronotope, while the centre does actually exist, it is subject to an order in which the human has no place of consequence, except as either puppet or prey.

### The Library as Hollow Earth: "A Contaminated Text"

A thematic sequel to "The Library of Babel," Mark Samuels's "A Contaminated Text" is presented as a widening-out of the implications for the real world of Borges's narrative and its library metaphors. Unlike "The Library of Babel," which refrains from depicting the extinction event intimated by its narrator, "A Contaminated Text" actually envisions such an event. Specifically, Samuels's narrative charts an apocalyptic scenario wherein the human race falls to the "malevolent demiurgi" of the library.

While both stories deploy the library in more or less the same way, as a meticulously catalogued space oriented towards the discovery of a centre, "A Contaminated Text" eschews "The Library of Babel's" overt mythical trappings. Instead, the story suggests that the library is simply one institutionalised edifice among many in a secular world, seemingly divested of its illusions regarding the sacred or the ideal. However, the spectral framework of the old ideal and its malign double persist incognito, haunting the physical structure of Samuels's library like a long-decayed memory. Thus, Samuels's tale can be viewed as a radically materialist answer to Borges's parable, a continuation of its critique of human library discourse, but also a re-interpretation of "The Library of Babel's" moral component in the

context of a recognisably real-world library. In this sense, the story demonstrates that Platonic discourses of library are alive and well despite being less visible, and further, that they are no less threatened by what they attempt to keep in catalogued order. In contrast to the adumbrated nature of Borges's library however, Samuels's library foregrounds the material realities of its construction—the flawed human labour and the sometimes haphazard methods of organisation that brought it into being. Such realities, the story suggests, are just as dangerously mutable as any discourse which might accompany them.

“A Contaminated Text” dispenses with Borges's device of the first-person narrator, indeed with any archetypal prophet who could retell the myth of the ideal library from the beginning. Samuels's narrative implies that the library's value as a symbol has long since been taken for granted, a reality no longer the subject of intense interrogation or fanaticism, a library whose usefulness and functionality for human purposes ostensibly speaks for itself. The library's myth has become the domain of cultural legacy, endlessly replayed and repeated in service to a practice long forgotten, but which nonetheless still seems to signify something of importance. The story begins by documenting, in journalistic third person, the opening of the Jose Vasconcelos Library, or “Megabiblioteca,” in Mexico City during 2006, a “gargantuan modernist building” inspired by both the architecture and the symbolism of Borges's “Library of Babel” (119). The values of openness and accessibility drive the construction of the space, with its “completely open plan design” and its “open tiers of metal bookcases ... suspended in immensity” amid a “labyrinth” of “glass-floored walkways” (120). The illusion is of time itself “suspended in immensity,” transparent and navigable via its total subordination to the spatial requirements of human design. The presence of Megabiblioteca's “seven hundred computer terminals” pushes its manifold accessibility into the realm of electronic space, further enhancing this transparency (119). Unlike the *ex nihilo* and “*ab aeterno*” existence of the Library of Babel, whose human librarians are forced to

construct entire myth-cycles from scratch to explain its existence, the Megabiblioteca has its human narratives of knowledge and truth ready-made for it in advance. As a knowing fabrication designed by humans for humans, it seems to exclude the possibility of anything centrifugal entering its sphere.

However, it transpires that the design of the Megabiblioteca, in endeavouring to be perfect in both form and vision, contains a crucial flaw. That is, there remains a discrepancy between the myth of the library and its reality, an essential incompatibility between the idealism of its design—its origin in Borges’s fiction, itself an ironic commentary on library mythologising—and the material requirements of its construction. Shortly after its opening, the library is “beset by structural problems” arising from its “fantastical design,” an insecurity that demands “additional building work” (119). The library’s failure to bear the weight of its own fantastic architecture reflects the threat to its status as a locus of human meaning production: if the design of the site fails to attain structural stability, how can it produce and maintain stability at the level of discourse? Moreover, instability at an external, architectonic level appears mirrored by a troubling discrepancy from within. According to the narrative, a source of popular objection to the Megabiblioteca’s infrastructure “was that the building was not designed to house a pre-existing collection,” and has thus “been dependent on a process of extraneous acquisition, taking on a mass of volumes donated by public and private publishers” (120). Once again, the library’s ideals are shown to be totally artificial, a product of hubris. The integrity of the library’s mythos fails to align with the material logistics of its assemblage, the material and capital realities it relies upon to en flesh its chronotope with form. This discontinuity represents yet another example of the weird library chronotope’s dialogism. Site and metaphor fail to coalesce in centripetal fashion, to mean the same thing and speak in the same voice. This causes centrifugal cracks to form over the whole, allowing polluted elements to access and subvert the centre from within.



Consequently, what we get in “A Contaminated Text” is a reversal of “The Library of Babel’s” general movement. In Borges’s tale, the goal of the Librarians is to penetrate the “circumference” of their library, to find an exit from inside that could lead them to their vindication somewhere beyond the library’s interminable sphere. Conversely, Samuels’s tale describes an invasion that penetrates the library from without, a contagion that infects both the space and time of its chronotope, as well as any human exposed to it. This is, once more, an unintended side effect of the Megabiblioteca’s structural instability, the fact that it can only fill its shelves—and sustain its illusion of completeness—via a process of external acquisition. The openness of the library’s design and its aspiration to completeness prove to be fatal weaknesses at the structural level, allowing centrifugal elements—books that fail quarantine—to bypass its defences like a Trojan Horse. To paraphrase Adorno and Horkheimer, the library as transcendent emblem of a “world,” and the “all-powerful concept of all that is projected into it,” becomes prey to the “object, the dead thing, the corpus ... [to] allegories of destruction which contain the meaning of its own downfall” (190; 232; 192).

In this sense, Platonic time—with its progression towards enlightenment through various stages—is not the main regulator of temporal flow in “A Contaminated Text.” Instead, Samuels’s story places the library in the context of what Rachel Falconer calls the dominant chronotope of contemporary short fiction: the apocalyptic “imminence of closure” (704). Following Susan Lohafer, Falconer posits that postmodern short fiction “tends to close by drawing the reader out of a position of knowledge or strength and leaving her/him “at risk—but adjusting in a strange world”” (705). In “A Contaminated Text,” this period of adjustment entails a thoroughly postmodern acknowledgement that no chronotope is internally secure, that all time-spaces—even the library—have the potential to be corrupted by codes and discourses, in fiction as well as outside of it. While chronotopes form the building blocks for human productions of meaning, the base from which we shape “the

signals we get from our exterior environment ... into a pattern,” they can also be hijacked by those signals in a way counter to what we intend for them (Clark and Holquist 279). “A Contaminated Text” describes just such a hijacking of the library chronotope by external forces that penetrate the library’s centre, changing its axiological value by a process of textual contamination. By the end, the library no longer stands for preservation and survival, but destruction: as a chronotope, it becomes synonymous with the end-times.

The point at which the library reverts to an allegory of destruction in “A Contaminated Text” is the hasty addition of a collection to its “existing stock”: the private library of deceased occultist Wolfgang Martz” (121). The cornerstone of the collection is *The Abyss of Voola*, along with a “series of papers” inserted “inside the front cover” (121). The papers prove to be study notes on the text itself, memoranda aiding in the interpretation of a grimoire whose narrative is neither completely factual nor completely fictional. As the librarian, Douglas Marlow, correlates the secondary texts with their sources in the manner of a Lovecraftian scholar, he learns of Martz’s subservience to the “Voolans,” an alien race who are “denizens of Inner Space”:

they are not denizens of Outer Space, but denizens of Inner Space. They haunt the interiors of hollow worlds. Ancient they are, but only in reverse, for they have come backwards in time from the ultimate future. For them the track of time is from end to beginning, and evolution is a process of return to the slime. Gods they were once, but fiends they were now. ... All praise the Voolans! For they shall lay waste the illusions (122)

Regulated by a death drive in thrall to a prior state of existence, the Voolans are agents of a centrifugality which precedes any univocal language of meaning. Further, there is the suggestion that their preferred space—hollow worlds—makes them ideal inhabitants of the library, itself a world-analogue whose discourses are hollow and porous. Martz’s revelation of the final truth—that “there is no conscious thought in men. All is Voola”—implies that the

library has always been a covert refuge for forces inimical to human life (123). This is due to the following two facts: (1) the library signifies a ledger for conscious thought and its history, a receptacle of meta-knowledge taking in all known time and space, as well as the human narratives fashioned from such meta-knowledge in order to make sense of it; (2) if conscious thought is Voola, then the meta-knowledge of the library is itself an atavistic phenomenon, aligned treacherously against its human hosts in “preparing the way for the reign of the Voolans on the surface world” (124). The existence of the Voolans is thus exemplary of China Miéville’s dictum that the “worldweave” and its many analogues like the library are “ill-made” and threadbare (1115). As much as they might prove useful, their insides are always contingent and worm-eaten, liable to harbour parasitic others that stare back at us with contempt. In laying “waste the illusions” of all centripetal narratives, the Voolans reveal that such fictions were always geared towards their preservation and survival, not our own.

In this way, the chronotope of the library in Samuels’s story represents an exaggerated engagement with the hollowness of those narratives in extra-diegetic reality. The consequence of this engagement is the revelation that such narratives presage death while seeming to stand for death’s deferral. Anthony Wall writes that the Bakhtinian chronotope signifies “a form of thought that flees the very closure that time, as the ultimate meta-knowledge coming in the form of death, will one day try to impose” (145-46). I would argue that the same is true of the library, that it represents a symbolic flight from closure, from the end times that seem to bookend its chronotopic narrative of progress. In being the symbol for the apex of human knowledge, the library represents a form of salvation and a form of immortality, a *pharmakon* against the negation of knowledge accompanying death. However, as much as the library signifies a symbolic overcoming of death, a skirting of its own narrative’s logical conclusion, it is also always a symbol of closure’s imminence. In other words, the library as a pretty human fiction of survival is always undermined by the dead

weight of the knowledge it contains, the centuries of sedimented data entombed on its shelves. The library exists symbolically on the precipice of death, hemmed in by an abyss whose existence it refuses to document, but which nonetheless threatens at all times to return it to the “slime” of the Voolans.

What happens to the Megabiblioteca and its human clientele by the end of the story is thus of little surprise. Marlow’s careless replacing of *The Abyss of Voola* and its supplementary papers on a shelf in the library precipitates the expected contagion, as the Voolan grimoire superimposes itself onto the text of every other book. “It was a textual fungus,” we are told, a “disease of language, that proved beyond the institution’s ability to control,” and which led to “hysteria,” “recurring dreams” and fatal “brain damage” for anyone who borrowed and read from the library: “all books were becoming *The Abyss of Voola*” (126-7; 128). Once more however, the dialogism of the story’s chronotope hinges on a final and little suspected movement back to a centripetal orientation. This centre is nothing less than the “Abyss” of the grimoire’s title; but, as the final lines of the story indicate, it is not the Voolan’s abyss, but our own:

For *The Abyss of Voola* did not exist. It had never existed. Men’s minds had brought it into life, by writing over the text in existing books. And the Hollow Earth was but a symbol of the insides of a skull, and the alien thoughts that burrowed therein. ... The brains of mankind house the Voolans. Or perhaps vice versa. One cannot say for sure. (128-29)

The centripetal in this passage signifies a final belated closure, an implosion in which all narrative certainties collapse in on themselves, exposing the centrifugal slime beneath. The story ends with a mise-en-abyme in which everything—human, library, book, contagion, and even the Voolans themselves—recedes into a symbolic apocalypse: the time and space of the library chronotope self-annihilates at the point where it finally confronts its own “structural insecurity.” The sole certainty remaining is one suggested by Borges’s chief librarian in “The

Library of Babel”: “The certainty that everything has been written negates us and turns us into phantoms” (85). The ultimate disclosure made by Samuels’s story is that we negate ourselves; we turn our world into a phantom of itself by prolonging the pretence of knowledge, upholding discourses and axioms of the library (and, by extension, the world) that are unliveable. The apocalypse of signification brought about by the story’s “contaminated text” is nothing more than a symbol of our own “alien” and pathological “thoughts.” The library reveals itself as the “hollow earth” wherein these pathologies spiral, taking grandiose form, but ultimately leading us toward the same inevitable closure.

## Conclusion

Although they approach the project in different ways, “The Library of Babel” and “A Contaminated Text” both succeed as meta-critical interrogations of the library as a chronotope in its most basic, extra-diegetic form. That is, while the libraries represented in the works have their centripetal discourses negated by unreal inhuman horrors, both works are aware that such discourses are themselves very real. Each story reflects ironically on the fact that the ideal metaphor of the library is a lived reality even today, an actual chronotope of our world in which the values of knowledge, accessibility, and organisation come together in the form of a unitary and centripetal language partaken of by all who enter its site. In this way, the library chronotope of literary representation exemplifies how the time and space of chronotopes in general are never purely neutral, but always exist in the presence of human expectation. As Holquist rightly claims, “[w]hat marks the necessary presence of the human subject” in the chronotope, “is the assumptions that time and space are never merely spatial or temporal, but axiological as well” (152). In other words, all chronotopes “have values attached to them,” codes and ancillary symbols which determine the kind of flesh and blood experience they circumscribe for their all too willing subjects (Holquist 152). That subjects

continue to propagate the attached values is a symptom of the cyclical dynamism at work in the chronotope's production of meaning. As a "generic technique" for processing abstract meaning into "the form of a sign that is audible and visible for us," chronotopes such as the library artificially create the very truth they claim to make visible and audible (Bakhtin 84).

However, what makes the chronotope of the library in both stories identifiably a weird fiction chronotope is that such artificial languages are shown to always be prone to decay, and even subversion. Each narrative, in charting the dialogic movements of the library, demonstrates how centripetal languages transgress their own rules, revealing the language of flux beneath even the most comforting or worldly symbol. Thus, the weird library chronotope exemplifies weird fiction's obsession with language's potential for self-stultification, and a reminder of Holquist's contention that "although language can provide the basis for giving the appearance of stability to the world, the forms by which it does so are themselves mutable [and] in flux" (148). Finally, in presenting a third movement underpinning the exchange between centripetal and centrifugal forces, the weird library chronotope reveals that Bakhtin's dialogism is no simple binary opposition, but a process. A straightforward division of centripetal and centrifugal assumes that any unitary language is not itself a kind of seething chaos, a centre without human provenance. In the same moment, as Borges suggests in "The Library of Babel," even the most illegible of languages has the potential to contain some singularly "terrible meaning" all its own.

## **Chapter 4**

# **Monsters of Discourse: The Weird Library as Heterotopia**

The following chapter examines weird fiction's library topos from another theoretical paradigm that, while being distinct from the chronotope, shares certain features with Bakhtin's conceptual framework. Much of the significance of the weird library lies in it being a space that is lived, experienced both topologically and discursively by the characters who inhabit it. In this sense, weird fiction engages with the library as more than just a set of narrative parameters, as a time-space which is fixed according to the requirements of a story's movement or arc. As I have already argued, Bakhtin's chronotope always presupposes a diegetic engagement with its counterpart in extra-diegetic reality, and a vested interest in the various discourses that go into making up a time-space as a world in which humans congregate according to certain rules. That is, as well as possessing a chronotopic status in weird narratives, the library is also represented as constituting a kind of *heterotopia*. It is a space whose discourses, while being exaggerated in literary form, speak to both the real and the disconcertingly imaginary aspects of human experience.

Heterotopias occupy a liminal relation to their adjacent sites and spaces; not only are they self-reflexive spaces through which social, political, and metaphysical discourses are made visible, they are also thresholds for crossing into and exposing parallel strains of discourse. In this way, heterotopias are always shadowed by their potential for reversing relationships of power, and for making dark and oppressive what was previously thought of as comforting and habitable. In having the capacity, as Foucault says, to "neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect," heterotopias represent portals to the realm of nightmare ("Of Other Spaces" 3). Moreover, its meaning as a site is

always in the process of being contested, always under threat. The values and meanings which humans implicitly attach to the library are prone to be refashioned by other forces, monstrous and discursive, emanating from both inside and outside the space.

These transformative features mark weird fiction's library heterotopia. The weird charts the inversion of the library's humanist utopia into nonhuman dystopia. Additionally, this discursive slip into darkness is compounded by the library for the reason that it is both a textual space—in the sense that all spaces are textual—and, more literally, a space of text(s). In other words, the books of the weird library are always crucial to the unlocking of the heterotopia's monstrous discourses. Books form the primary locus through which the library is experienced in the here and now by human characters. The act of reading library books, containing their own occult subject matter and forbidden content, adds to and permeates the discursive field of the library itself.

### Foucault's Heterotopia

In his paper "Of Other Spaces" (1967), Michel Foucault defines the heterotopia as "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (4). Not only is the heterotopia marked by its real liveability as "a kind of effectively enacted utopia"; it is also a site of conflict in which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture ... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" ("Of Other Spaces" 3). The nature of heterotopian conflict is discursive and semiotic. While taking the form of a recognisable site of human traffic, demarcated in lived reality and governed by strict laws of conduct, the heterotopia also opens out onto the realm of fantasy, a hinterland in which human laws and discourses are broken and replaced by others. In this way, heterotopias are gateways to the fictions and narratives we use to make sense of the real. In inhabiting them, humans not only partake of such fictions, but also engage in a process of altering them in line with our



changing expectations. The heterotopia traces a liminal zone throughout lived space, a zone of dialogue in which material realities of space and human fantasies of space come into contact.

There is another side to heterotopias however, one that is implied by Foucault when he speaks of “contestation” and “inversion,” but is made more explicit elsewhere in his work. This is the dark side of the heterotopia, the potential for its geographies to become dystopian or monstrous rather than utopian and anthropocentric. The concept of utopia rests on a human interpretation of space as something ideal, and the capacity for such an interpretation to be transformed into a liveable reality, however imperfect such a reality might seem compared with the ideal itself. Hugh J. Silverman argues that heterotopias maintain a dialogue between three kinds of spatial discourses, what he calls “heterotopic latitudes”: hypertopian (“de-generate utopian”), hypotopian (“de-generate dystopian”) and topologically neutral (326). The use of the term “de-generate” signals Silverman’s realist modification of utopia and dystopia into liveable, material worlds. Unlike utopia and dystopia, hypertopia and hypotopia are not confined to the realm of idealist or nightmarish fictions, but are flesh and blood spaces occupiable in the real world. “[T]he fictions of utopia/dystopia become an epistemological and discursive reality” in the heterotopia claims Silverman, making it a space in which such fictions are lived, its discourses experienced (328). For Silverman, these discourses are not divided, but overlap, making their proximity always a matter of degrees of separation. Thus, the lived experience of one discourse is always threatened by the possibility of slippage into the other. In so far as heterotopias are connected to the fantastical, to the nearly-limitless domain of the human imagination or unconscious, they can always be shadowed by concealed demonic visions. As well as a place into which humans project hypertopian discourses of “enclosed” knowledge and total meaning, it is also a space haunted at the same time by hypotopian discourses of dissolution, and the morbid taint of death.

The library is no more immune to this demonic possession than any other heterotopia. Conventionally, libraries aspire to represent a utopian, or at least a hypertopian, vision of the world as a perfectly ordered catalogue, a near-infinitely accessible collection of knowledge forever at the finger-tips of its human custodians. As I have discussed previously, libraries are a supplementary fiction to the larger fiction of a world-plan, an exemplary, organised schema meant to justify humankind's tenuous position at the centre of things. However, the utopian fiction of libraries is sustainable only up to a point, a tipping point wherein the ideal collapses, and the lived reality of libraries falls into a hypotopian degeneracy. Manguel has noted the perversity behind the project of collecting and maintaining libraries, arguing that such hopefulness flies in the face of modernity's "dearth of meaning and lack of discernible purpose":

And yet, with bewildering optimism, we continue to assemble whatever scraps of information we can gather in scrolls and books and computer chips, on shelf after library shelf, whether material, virtual, or otherwise, pathetically intent on lending the world a semblance of sense and order, while knowing perfectly well that, however much we'd like to believe the contrary, our pursuits are sadly doomed to failure. (3)

Repression of this inevitable failure is key to maintaining the utopian idealism of the library project, the optimum latitude for its fiction to become an "epistemological reality." However, libraries are fundamentally heterotopian in that they are constantly slipping between order and disorder: their reality is one of exchange between the poles of hypertopia and hypotopia, and the discourses which accompany both. In this sense, heterotopias are also subject to a dialogism; like Bakhtin's chronotope, they oscillate from a perceived (centripetal) univocality, whose voice extols the virtue of a centre, to a (centrifugal) polyphony of many voices from which no order or centre can be extrapolated.

Unlike the chronotope, however, the heterotopia functions not by subordinating space to time, but by doing the opposite. Time, in the heterotopian library, is experienced entirely as a spatial dimension, one that is easily lost, regained, or annulled altogether in the vastness of the library's corridors. Foucault notes that the heterotopian character of the library is defined by an "indefinitely accumulating time," the accumulation of which makes it experienceable only in spatial terms:

the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place ("Of Other Spaces" 7)

In perceiving time as being sedimented like a "thing" within the heterotopian library, Foucault demonstrates how time is secondary to space in the library's formation. Through being accumulated in the corpus of the library, time becomes a side-effect of the spatial characteristics of the collection, a metaphor for the totality of its "general archive"—the entirety of history, all histories, enclosed in a single spatial vessel. However, the library is simultaneously lost to time, symbolically immune from its ravaging transformations by virtue of being preserved. Consequently, time in the library is both lost and yet permanently on display, frozenly insentient in a way that makes it uncanny. Manguel characterises the uncanniness of library time as coming into its own at night, where the "structure of the place" loses its "straight lines" (13). Here, time's textual accumulations take on a spark of menace, becoming the void in which the hypertopian catalogue fades into a hypotopian shadow:

In the dark, with the windows lit and the rows of books glittering, the library is a closed space, a universe of self-serving rules that pretend to replace or translate those of the shapeless universe beyond. ... Sounds become muffled, thoughts grow louder. ... My movements feel

unwittingly furtive, my activity secret. I turn into something of a ghost. The books are now the real presence and it is I, their reader, who, through cabbalistic rituals of half-glimpsed letters, am summoned up and lured to a certain volume and certain page. The order decreed by library catalogues is, at night, merely conventional; it holds no prestige in the shadows. (12-14)

Importantly, Foucault also represents such spatial accumulations of time as suggestive of a shadowy, sinister force opposed to convention in his definition of heterotopia. Elsewhere, in describing an obsession with time and history marking the discursive climate of the nineteenth century, he notes a preoccupation with the “themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciations of the world” (“Of Other Spaces” 1). It is these “menacing glaciations” that take solid spatial form in the weird library, as well as the threat of what the “accumulated” knowledge of “dead men” might conceal, whether as particles of dust, mould, or the rot of mildew that corrupts text into unreadable traces.

In weird fiction, stories revolving around libraries frequently represent research in the library as the pivot from which its heterotopia darkens, becoming a nightmare. In such cases, the comfortable and homely, self-edifying, or magical and timeless conditions of the library take on a spark of the deranged or pathological, as the researcher or reader lose themselves to its “menacing glaciations.” In J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Green Tea” (1869), a particularly early example of the weird tale, the clergyman Reverend Jennings is driven to madness and eventual suicide by the intrusion of a spectral “monkey” of “unfathomable malignity” into his idyllic life of library research and writing (21). The cause of the haunting, he believes, is a result of a too close fixation on the subject of his research, Paganism and the “religious metaphysics of the ancients” (17). While this belief is framed, in Jennings’s mind, by a Christian guilt for delving too far into forbidden orders of knowledge (as well as an over-reliance on the eponymous green tea for stimulation), certain passages in the story suggest

that the study or library itself may have been complicit in the Reverend's downfall. On visiting his patient for the first time, Dr. Martin Hesselius, the story's narrator, notes with alarm the claustrophobic conditions of Jennings's place of research:

It was much larger than I had expected and stacked with books on every side, from the floor to the ceiling. ... My steps fell noiselessly. The way the bookcases stood out placed the windows, particularly narrow ones, in deep recesses. The effect of the room was, although extremely comfortable, and even luxurious, decidedly gloomy, and aided by the silence, almost oppressive. ... I stepped into this perfectly silent room ... with a peculiar foreboding; and its darkness, and solemn clothing of books ... helped this sombre feeling. (10)

There is a sense of something tomb-like about Jennings's library, the inference being that the "oppressive" nature of its accumulated books, however comfortably hypertopian it seems on first glance, might be ultimately responsible for the morbid turn in Jennings's personality. The Reverend even admits as much when he confides in Hesselius that his obsession with his subject matter (a topic he found "delightfully interesting" in its early stages) became dangerously all-consuming: "I wrote a great deal; I wrote late at night. I was always thinking on the subject, walking about, wherever I was, everywhere. It thoroughly infected me" (17). As much as the library represents a pathway to a mythical or utopian accumulation of knowledge, too much time spent poring over the textual remnants of "dead men" it contains is shown to induce paranoia and, in the case of "Green Tea," a fearful personification of research-anxiety.

In contrast to "Green Tea" and its emphasis on the library's degeneration from within, Matt Cardin's "The Writer's Answer: An Abhorrence to All Flesh" (2002) is notable for having much of its narrative occur outside the library, while still playing upon heterotopian discourses of library throughout. Contrary to Foucault, the library in weird fiction is anything but "immobile": it does not rely on a fixed spatial locus for its discourses to take effect or its

activities to be carried out. As Silverman has argued, heterotopias “are not limited to a particular circumscribed space; rather they are everywhere,” an omnipresence which also has the potential to horrify in unexpected ways (329). As such, a character in weird fiction may be experiencing the library through its various discourses and ideologies even when not actually inhabiting it as a site. Such is true of Todd, the protagonist of “The Writer’s Answer,” who spends much of the story attending a party at the home of his old friend Darby. However, the party portion of the narrative is framed by an earlier account of Todd’s preparation for the party in his private library the night before. The dilettantish Todd treats his library as a mirror for his vanity and his self-image as a self-styled intellectual. His primary interest in possessing a library, it seems, is for reflecting an inflated image of himself as a reader of wide and eclectic tastes, and who possesses the requisite of “literary sagacity” for elite social gatherings. “At such times I was also the most smugly happy with my own library,” he admits, adding later “I often took pleasure at the thought of what this diverse collection might say about me and my intellect” (15; 16). Todd’s attempt to “erect a façade of learning” via scanning his entire collection on theology before the party has ironic consequences: his shallow approach to research leads to him accidentally uncovering a “fragment” of horrifying and malign truth hidden amongst the texts of his library, one that he is unable to remember upon waking (17). When he arrives at the party, his failure to recognise the true significance of libraries, and the degenerate shadows they contain, continues. Curtly, he dismisses his fellow guest, the public librarian Walter Snyder, as boring and uneducated (“[I] was disappointed to learn that he was not a professor but a librarian”), all the while misreading people via their surface appearance in the same way as he skimmed his own books earlier (24).

By the end of the story, Todd’s disregard for libraries and librarians, and his incompetence as a reader beyond the casual inflation of his own ego, coheres into something

far more nightmarish. His friend Darby confesses to him the nature of his family curse, in which an ancestor's involvement with an Egyptian occult sect brings about a revelation of "Truth breaking through into the world of flesh" (30). At once, Todd remembers the fragment from his dreams—"an abhorring unto all flesh"—the very scrap of truth his library had revealed to him, despite his best efforts to read in the name of pretence and "façade." The truth, that devouring worms within human flesh are only held in temporary abeyance by divine will, is described by Darby "as a plague, too," echoing the way the library worked upon Todd in his dreams, organising itself into a terrible whole ("I was plagued all night long by the half-understood ideas of a dozen different writers") (30; 17).

The final point of synthesis between library and the disturbing truth behind worldly flesh is the revelation that Snyder, the librarian, is the agent of the worms and their awakening, as well as being the original librarian of the sect ("Darby, what position did the Egyptian man hold in his church? What did he actually do for them?' ... 'He was their librarian.'") (32). Annihilating Darby with "a finality worse than death," Snyder ("Not a positive presence [now] but a hole cut in the fabric of the room") allows Todd to escape, and to be slowly overtaken by the worms of a knowledge too horrible to bear (34). "The worms have taken over completely, in the food, in the furniture, in my library," Todd confesses at the end, "Yesterday I opened a book and found it completely eaten away, but I could read a new Word [truth] in the contours of the pulsating mass that had replaced the text" (35). The lexographic resemblance between "word" and "worm" here is telling; The library becomes the space where the worms crawl in, infecting text as they infect life. As Foucault has noted, this potential for language and text to alter itself and, in so doing, to mutate spatial discourses, is the mark of all heterotopias:

heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names,

because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which they construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together.’ (*The Order of Things* xviii)

It should be clarified here that what heterotopias undermine is human language, or rather the human use of language to construct viable hypertopias. Language itself continues to exist, unshackled from the syntax that bound it to the human world of stable reference. What both tales above register is the infinite potential of library heterotopias to transgress their own discursive norms. Weird fiction exaggerates the way language, and text in particular, has the potential to redefine space along demonic or dystopian lines.

### The Heterotopia as Magic Circle

While Foucault’s discussion of heterotopias centres on human spatial interaction—the way humans construct heterotopian spaces by rewriting their discourses via movement and experience—he also leaves the door open for heterotopias to contain forces completely alien to such experience. That is, the very fact that heterotopias “undermine language” and “shatter” human “syntax” suggests that they are contaminated in advance by discourses which can’t be read, that are semantically impenetrable, left over from another time in the form of “menacing glaciations.” By fracturing determinate language in such a way, heterotopias are arguably always potential locations for the nonhuman. They designate thresholds for the things, forces, presences, or discourses that cannot be assimilated into a human idiom, remaining empty or recalcitrant to human demands.

That the heterotopia can be both accessible to humans on the one hand and inaccessible on the other suggests that it involves the experience of certain limits, specifically the line between human knowledge and non-knowledge. This idea of heterotopias pertaining to the limits of human thought and experience is addressed explicitly by speculative realist



Eugene Thacker, in a move which shares many similarities with the heterotopia as it has been characterised by Foucault and others. Importantly, Thacker's discussion of the epistemological limits of spatial experience has ramifications for how the weird library can be treated as a space in which text dissolves such limits.

Speaking of the spatial alien-ness of the world, Thacker claims that "the human can only understand the world by transforming it into an object to relate to ... into something familiar, accessible, or intuited in human terms" (30). Such an anthropocentric perspective always renders the existence of the world in relation to the human and its needs and wants. But, Thacker asks, what happens when this objectification of the world becomes impossible, when the world turns away from us or, at worst, turns *on* us? Thacker emphasises the un-objectifiable materiality of the world as the remainder which escapes anthropocentric discourses of belonging-ness, the "world-in-itself" that stares back at us from every covert (5):

This vague ... term – the non-human – can, of course, have a wide range of meanings, from the rock or the chair to the black depths of the cosmos. ... But the non-human remains, by definition, a limit; it designates both that which we stand in relation to and that which remains forever inaccessible to us. (26-27)

This nonhuman materiality prevents the world-in-itself from being fully visible, and yet it mediates all human engagement with space, making the entire planet something of a heterotopia.

In order to present the above question—what happens when the world refuses to fall in with an orientation that privileges the human?—in the form of a dialectic, Thacker describes the space of the world as alternating between two metaphors. The first is the "magic circle," which is the world mapped as a cartography of humanist discourses, a "world-for-us" into which humans project a framework of ideal relations with themselves at the centre (55).

In other words, the magic circle is, literally and figuratively, a protective border drawn around a centre occupied humans, a privileged position from which they can construct narratives that further justify and make sense of this centrality. Magic circles reflect, in utopian and anthropocentric terms, the “cosmic or mythic ordering of the universe,” as well as determining the “social and political” structures which fix the world into a stable semi-utopia:

the magic circle delimits a boundary between law and transgression, the legitimate and illegitimate, the sacred and profane. All incarnations of the magic circle are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (54)

Thacker’s mention of performance here gestures to the artificial, often theatrical nature of the magic circle. It is a place whose discourses are performed, whose norms and boundaries are articulated in advance by a discursive script, one that is acted out by humans as a “lived fiction” (Silverman 331). In this respect, Thacker’s magic circle corresponds to Silverman’s idea of the hypertopian, a “de-generate utopia” which, unlike an actual utopia, can be lived, can have its performance refined and its discourses “developed” (331). An example of the magic-circle library in weird fiction would be the expansive utopian vision of absolute knowledge enshrined by the Megabiblioteca in Mark Samuels’s “A Contaminated Text.” In it, the library forms the basis for a prototypical magic circle narrative: it is constructed as a utopian tribute to enlightenment, a place which tirelessly re-performs human discourses of habitability and obsessive classification. Samuels’s Megabiblioteca is designed to allow the fiction of the world’s manifold transparency to be lived, a place in which the “cosmic and mythic ordering of the universe” is “suspended in immensity” (119). Its “forty-four thousand five-hundred square metres of space” are also marked by magical circularity. The design is of “open tiers of metal bookshelves that project over the central hall,” and which are “flanked by a veritable labyrinth of glass-covered walkways” (120). The library thus resembles both a

theatre, in which discourses of human knowledge are performed through the art of browsing, and a temple, whose labyrinthine structure is designed to keep out unwanted, “profane,” or “illegitimate” elements.

Consequently, the magic circle is also suggestive of the human gazing outward, towards the uncolonised and nonhuman aspects of space, as much as it is concerned with its own internal ordering. Thacker’s idea of the circle brings out the latent anxieties of hypertopian discourse in that its circumference suggests a defensive perimeter, a barrier keeping out the nonhuman world and allowing us to deal with it on our own terms. If, as Thacker claims, “the magic circle is the human looking out and confronting the unhuman, anonymous, hidden world,” then the hypertopia must also be thought to involve an over-the-shoulder glance to what lies beyond its ken (82).

The second metaphor, opposed to the magic circle, is the “magic site.” Here, the polarity between human and nonhuman is inverted: the monstrous indeterminacy of the world “look[s] back at us,” intruding into the human circle and compromising its circumference in dystopian fashion (82). “The magic site,” argues Thacker, is “the place where the hiddenness of the world presents itself in a paradoxical way ... revealing itself – as hidden” (82). In other words, the magic site is the stage on which the world makes itself known *as* unknowable, wherein human knowledge of the world is shown to be illusory, and where absence and non-meaning divulge themselves as the sacred truths of space. The magic site is said to be alive with “entities that are neither animate nor inanimate, neither organic nor inorganic, neither material nor ideal,” (81); in particular, claims Thacker, it reveals itself through the effluents of “mists and ooze,” inorganic processes which are themselves subject to forms of nonhuman time (82). Spatially, the magic site appears as the magic circle circumference frayed or entirely negated, the protection annulled.

As well as being a magic circle, the weird library is just as often configured as a magic site, frequently in the same tale. The usefulness of Thacker's metaphorical pair (magic circle/magic site) is that it provides an extension of the heterotopia's oppositional dyad (utopia/dystopia), connecting it also to the separation of human and nonhuman space-time. Weird fiction regularly engages with each of these pairs, in dramatizing the library's slip from a human place of boundaries and laws to a nonhuman space of monstrous transgression. Furthermore, the weird library adds at least two more elements to Thacker's list of nonhuman effluents: *fungus* and *dust*. In Campbell's "Out of Copyright," dust transforms the ordered circle of Thorne's horror-fiction archive into an unliveable site choked with the spores. Likewise, in "A Contaminated Text," the magic circle of the Megabiblioteca becomes a magic site through the introduction into its collection of a textual fungus or mould. This has the effect of inverting the library's discourse and its liveability: formerly a lived utopia in which browsers maintain the theatre of an accessible, friendly world, it becomes a human dystopia in which a contagion spreads from the centre outwards. Crucially, the contamination is not straightforwardly a textual corruption *or* a fungal one; its source, like its effect, is indeterminate—it exists only to corrupt truth and meaning. Thus, the magic circle is compromised from within by a mould whose nonhuman, *Voolan* origins remain unfathomable, a blank space that can never be filled by human knowledge or discourse. Discursively, the weird library becomes "an affront to humanity" rather than a "tribute" (Silverman 332).

Most of the time, claims Thacker, "the magic site spontaneously happens," overwriting the magic circle "without any human intervention" (82). In Silverman's terms, the magic site is fundamentally hypotopian, a vacuously "undetermined" space of absence and potential dystopia noted by Silverman. However, the magic site also signifies a reversal of the heterotopian process, also described by Silverman, in which the hypotopia becomes a

project of hypertopian development, open to human “reconstruction, restoration, or reformulation” (331). On the contrary, the magic site is beyond any such rehabilitation, possessing a semiotic emptiness that exceeds all human capacity to fill it. In fact, the site not only annuls but also reverses this process of rehabilitation. It actively works to underdetermine and un-develop the magic circle and all such humanised spaces. Consequently, the magic site’s revelation signals a rewriting of spatial discourse to the extent that the human is no longer welcome, written out of the performance.

### The Shadow Out of Discourse

Importantly, Thacker also notes that while the magic site “need not have special buildings or temples constructed for it,” there are “cases” in which “sites are like magic circles, constructed by human beings for specific purposes” but which have long since been forgotten and abandoned (82). Similarly, the weird library can be conceived as a debased magic circle, a temple of discourse set up to embellish the world as an ordered utopia, but which—in the course of tales—radically deviates from this intention. In other words, the weird library is a site disguised as a circle, a refuge whose anthropocentrism discourses mask something monstrously nonhuman at its core.

In weird fiction, it is text, the primary vehicle through which discourse is disseminated, that forms the source of the infection: text is the carrier that initiates the library’s heterotopian transition from circle into site, utopia into dystopia. The “menacing glaciations of the world” and the equally foreboding “preponderance[s] of dead men” noted by Foucault can only achieve sentience through the textual traces the dead have left behind (“Of Other Spaces” 1). In both “Out of Copyright” and “A Contaminated Text,” the reading of texts belonging to “dead men” is what activates the nonhuman properties of dust and fungus, granting such effluences agency and presence. In Samuels’s story, contagion operates

both literally and metaphorically, infecting the physical properties of the libraries books, but also their textual properties, corrupting form and meaning simultaneously. Moreover, text is what binds the hypertopian and hypotopian dimensions of the library together. It is what allows discourses of knowledge and power to be established in the library, just as it allows such discourses to be monstrously replaced by indeterminacy and emptiness. In weird fiction, the language and writing underpinning the ordered nature of the library's circle becomes a primal and occult thing. Utopian discourses of total knowledge become unreadable and dystopian at the very moment that text betrays its reader.

This otherness of discourse is explored by Michel de Certeau according to a metaphors of demonic possession. Specifically, he discusses the problems involved in assessing the speech of a possessed person using discourses, theological or psychological, that presume to objectify such disturbing speech. Indeed, Certeau claims that such institutional discourses fail to account for *who is speaking* in such cases. This discursive failure is bound to language's capacity for self-transgression: the monstrous moment in which "disturbance becomes, *inside* discourse, the ... transgression *of* discourse" (249; original emphasis). In other words, through trying to normalise the demonical other within discourse and text, such texts actually serve to give form to this transgressive demon, granting it a voice and the capacity to possess anew. In fact, it is *only* through text, and specifically the scholarly apparatus of citation, that such possessive nonhuman entities reveal themselves. The discourse of knowledge, of *knowing* the demonic or uncanny, becomes the chief locus from which it emerges:

It is a literary technique ... which sets discourse in a position of knowledge from which it can give voice to the other. Something different returns in this discourse, however, along with the citation of the other; it remains ambivalent; it upholds the danger of an uncanniness which alters the translator's or commentator's knowledge. For discourse, citation is the menace and

suspense of a lapsus. Alterity dominated—or possessed—through discourse maintains the power of being a fantastic ghost, or indeed a possessor in a latent state. (251)

This other of discourse, what Certeau calls “the elsewhere of discourse within discourse,” turns the tables on the institutional idioms which try to possess it, to classify it within their corpus of meaning (251). Magic circle narratives, such as library narratives, are always already compromised by what they allow to appear in text, as this void from elsewhere “inscribe[s] a surreptitious “possession” into the network” of their “taxonomies” (251). Consequently, through being a space whose heterotopian value is inseparable from its texts, the weird library is also the breeding ground for the “fantastic ghosts” *of* text.

One story which exemplifies the discursive shift from circle to site through text’s transgressive medium is H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Out of Time.” The tale is notable for its polyphony of library-related discourse, both human and nonhuman, and how for much of the story this polyphonic conflict stands in for the library as a site. When the library does come into view, it appears as a monstrous symbol for humankind’s alienation from the cosmos itself. Thus, the story climaxes with the final negation of anthropocentric discourses of knowledge, a situation where language surrenders to the nonhuman that possesses it. Ultimately, Lovecraft’s tale stages a heterotopian conflict in which “[t]he universal speaking subject is effaced from the prose of the world” (Certeau 265).

The story centres on one “universal speaking subject,” the academic Nathaniel Peaslee, and his attempts to recover a series of lost and disquieting memories, gained during a five-year period of amnesia, that linger suggestively in his unconscious. What he finds is that he has been the victim of a spatiotemporal incursion from a group of all-powerful, extraterrestrial beings from Earth’s distant past. Their goal is to master time and space through recording an absolute history of “all things that ever were known or ever would be known” (365). Using a cosmic channel of their own design, one member of the “Great Race”

bypasses linear temporality in order to set up shop in Peaslee's mind in Earth's present. Thus housed, the being utilises Peaslee's learning and connections to discover all it can of humankind's knowledge of their own space and time before returning back to its own age with all it has gleaned (358). At the same time, Peaslee's consciousness is transplanted back through time to inhabit the body of his invader. During this period, he is coerced into writing a history of his own epoch to be housed in the Great Race's "Central Archives," an omni-library in which knowledge transcends the limitations imposed by space and time. The story concludes with the sanity-obliterating discovery that the substance of his dreams is real, that the ruins of the Central Archives have survived their own epoch and remain as a site of ruins within the desert of Western Australia.

As much as it represents a "mockery" of time and space, the Central Archives can also be considered a mockery of what the heterotopia stands for according to humans. That is, the Archives and its archivists draw upon the "scientific, historic, artistic, and anthropological knowledge" (358) of all races they come into contact with, exercising a kind of cultural imperialism in choosing "from every era and life form such thoughts, arts, and processes as might suit its own nature and situation" (365). Consequently, the very narratives of belongingness, the discourses of knowledge which underpin our wish for a magic circle or a utopia, are represented as being not our own; the human and human discourse alike are always the objects of something outside the circle, to be toyed with or experimented upon. Furthermore, the victims of this imperialism also become contributors to the great library, slave-authors to its extension. In this way, Peaslee becomes an unwitting agent for a magic site, an author who reduces the human world to a marginal footnote in the history of the universe through writing about it. Leif Sorensen argues something similar when he notes the dark vitality of the archive in Lovecraft's story, "an archive possessed of disturbing agency," intent on "reaching forward in time to act on those who attempt to use it" (502). In "The



Shadow Out of Time,” there is no escape from this all-seeing, all-knowing library, since it renders all boundaries, in so far as they are conceived by humans, malleable as clay. Ultimately, the Central Archives in “The Shadow Out of Time” presents a vision of the library as a hypotopian cosmogony, or an infinitely degenerating world schema. All the discourses which are seemingly designed to situate the human in a desirable position in space are actually geared to estranging us even further from space, from the magic site of the cosmos itself. This estranging transformation of discourse is effected not only through the texts of the Central Archives, but also through the texts of human archives and libraries in the story.

From the beginning, the tale concerns itself with the double-nature of discourse, with the dangers of speaking and writing. The narrative is framed as an affidavit or confession from Peaslee, in which he attempts to retell his experiences, to re-situate himself within language and, in so doing, to rehabilitate discourses of knowledge and reason:

After twenty-two years of nightmare and terror, saved only by a desperate conviction of the mythical source of certain impressions, I am unwilling to vouch for the truth of that which I think I found in Western Australia on the night of July 17-18, 1935. There is reason to hope that my experience was wholly or partly an hallucination—for which, indeed, abundant causes exist. And yet, its realism was so hideous that I sometimes find hope impossible. (350)

What is immediately noticeable about this passage is its discursive confusion. The certainty or uncertainty surrounding Peaslee’s experiences in the desert and earlier cannot be quantified either way according to a stable referent. The early sections of his affidavit are thus marked by a heterotopian indeterminacy, in which a spatial experience has “shattered” the “syntax which causes words and things ... to ‘hold together’” (*The Order of Things* xviii). Even at this stage, Peaslee is unable to find a fixable view of the world governed either by order *or* disorder; he is instead caught in a discursive fissure between the real and the

imaginary aspects of his experience of the Central Archives. Knowledge and certainty blur with dream and hallucination, as discourse becomes a thing to be distrusted and feared.

However, despite this dissociation within discourse, there is the sense in these early asides that Peaslee has, naively and despite everything, retained his trust in text to *tell the truth*. That is, his experiences appear to have taught him little regarding the slipperiness of text and its capacity to mutate the meaning of discourse; in other words, its capacity to hold Certeau's monstrous alterity within itself before treacherously revealing it. As such, his first thought when writing the affidavit is to "form some definite statement" regarding his abnormal experiences, "not only for the sake of my own mental balance, but to warn others who may read it seriously" (350). While he partially intends the document as a warning to others not to follow in his footsteps, there is a sense that this discursive intention is adhered to only half-heartedly. Peaslee is a special kind of flawed narrator, in that he is a student of libraries and learning, and thus always beholden to a utopian vision of library. Consequently, he urges readers of the affidavit to supplement their reading of it with a perusal of an entire library of facts and anecdotes relating to the experience. This effectively offsets the warning:

These pages—much in whose earlier parts will be familiar to close readers of the general and scientific press—are written in the cabin of the ship that is bringing me home. ... It is for the sake of such readers as are unfamiliar with the earlier phases of my case that I am prefacing the revelation itself with a fairly ample summary of its background. (350-51)

Through demonstrating an awareness of two generalised readerships, those who are familiar with the back-story and those who are not, the writing of this affidavit presupposes its advance inclusion in a library of sorts: an archive of "general and scientific" newspapers. As a result, the story illustrates, while at the same time critiques, human faith in libraries to register the facts lucidly, and to illumine even the darkest mysteries of the cosmos. Nowhere is this implicit faith more evident than in Peaslee's explanation of why he failed to verbally

inform his son, and closest confidante, of his experiences in the desert: “[r]eading and rereading at leisure will leave with him a more convincing picture than my confused tongue could hope to convey” (351). Thus, reading, and the opportunity for “rereading” afforded by libraries and text, is said to allay confusion and to allow human beings to digest meaning at their “leisure.”

Ultimately, the flawed nature of Peaslee’s character is due to his ambivalence regarding library discourses. On the one hand, the pseudo-memories he is haunted by render libraries and research as horrifically alien. He describes terrifying visions of his time spent in the Central Archives, a place where “[v]ast shelves of dark wood lined the walls, holding what seemed to be volumes of immense size with strange hieroglyphs on their backs” (360). Furthermore, he is able to represent the erudition of his alien secondary personality as unnatural, a scholarly aptitude and an ease with libraries taken to “wholly abnormal” extremes (358):

[M]y rate of reading and solitary study was phenomenal. I could master every detail of a book merely by glancing over it as fast as I could turn the leaves; while my skill at interpreting complex figures in an instant was veritably awesome. (354)

In aligning the image of the perfect librarian or scholar with an alien intelligence, the story makes the first obvious step in representing the library as a magic site. There is the suggestion here that the members of the Great Race possess a far more deep-seated and holistic connection to libraries than do humans. It is as if all libraries open out onto a greater reality for such beings, and that the level of their learning is borne of a nearly religious devotion to it.

On the other hand, Peaslee never lets these visions of unhomely library discourse deter him from repeating them himself. Indeed, Peaslee zealously retraces the research itinerary laid out for him by his guest. Anxious to learn the cause of his blackout, as well as

to discover the motives for research driving his “second self” over the same period, Peaslee conducts his own research into the mystery, even going so far as to reread the same books:

my examination of medical, historical, and anthropological records became indefatigable, involving travels to distant libraries, and finally including even a reading of the hideous books of forbidden lore in which my secondary personality had been so disturbingly interested. (363)

Convinced that his amnesia and dream experiences can be explained through objective and quantifiable research, Peaslee endeavours to find an anthropocentric cause for such displacement. “I began an intensive study of other cases of amnesia and visions,” he relates, “feeling that I might thereby objectivise my trouble and shake clear of its emotional grip” (363). Throughout his time spent in libraries, sifting through archives of mythology, folklore, and psychiatric case studies, his goal is to cross-reference the enigma of his experiences within a human narrative or stratum of knowledge.

In heterotopian terms, Peaslee seeks to recolonise those aspects of his experiences of libraries that are discursively void, hypotopian, visible only as dissociating dreams and fragments, replacing them with the veil of a liveable hypertopian reality. At this stage of the story, the library remains, despite everything, a safe haven for Peaslee in that it signifies precedent, a catalogue of analogous cases that would allow him to file away his dreams in a recognisable drawer of human history. For Peaslee, libraries are among the hypertopias which, in Silverman’s terms, “we [as humans] need to read, to interpret, to know, and to re-create. ... as a text that is already interpreted” (330). Furthermore, the library is not only a place which can itself be read and interpreted as hypertopian. It is also, ideally, the heterotopia which makes all other spaces, the world itself, readable according to hypertopian discourse. As Foucault has argued, heterotopias possess “the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites” (“Of Other Spaces” 3). In “The Shadow Out of Time,” the

library's relation to the space of the world takes the form of a magic circle, from within which the world can be confronted, understood and made habitable.

However, Peaslee's attempts to make the library a liveable utopia are compromised by the trajectory of his research. The discourse of homely orientation within the cosmos that he seeks to propagate is undone by what it conceals. Far from reconquering the library in the name of hypertopian humanism, Peaslee's research is instead geared towards repeating, and *legitimising*, the studies of his alien possessor. Furthermore, this reiteration of a nonhuman research pathway has the effect of returning Peaslee to the source of all hypotopian abnormality: the Central Archives, the first library of which all others are but an echo. Thus, the story's depiction of heterotopian conflict is staged as something of a trap for the human: the "universal speaking subject," Peaslee, traces a magic circle around the library's circumference through research, little realising that this "boundary" has already been broken, transgressed in advance by the very thing he sought to keep out. One of the greatest horrors in "The Shadow Out of Time" is that the library, as well as all the discourses that underpin it, belongs to a far older order of being than the human. The library as magic site precedes, but also predetermines, the library as magic circle in Lovecraft's story.

The revelation of the library's nonhuman origin climaxes with Peaslee reconnoitring the ruins of the Central Archives. Crucially, his discovery of this magic site is not predicated on any research he has done, but is secured through memory of his time spent psychically housed within an alien body. In this way, he is *still* possessed by a nonhuman intelligence, an other which possesses and interferes with discourses of spatial orientation. Familiarity with a space, the capacity to feel at home in one's surroundings, becomes an effect of the uncanny. Hypertopian confidence in one's surroundings is fractured by a hypotopian bewilderment: "I was wholly and horribly oriented," claims Peaslee (392). What can be interpreted from this is that spatial and temporal orientation, when they are divorced from the objectivity of the

human map-maker, become monstrous and horrifying, their discursive value inverted. As Peaslee confesses, “That I could visit unerringly any point in that structure ... which had escaped the changes and devastations of uncounted ages, I realized with hideous and instinctive certainty” (392). In this way, the Central Archives projects its own compass readings, transforming the human discourses of geography and history into utterly alien epistemologies. Knowing one’s place within the library, and consequently the world, are here represented ironically as being the very definition of alienation.

By the end of the story, horrifying spatial orientation for Peaslee dovetails to an equally horrific textual orientation. Guided by “some force of evil potency pulling at [his] dazed will and buried recollection,” Peaslee visits a certain lower level of the Archive and pulls from it a book-like object (397). Having opened it, he discovers, to his horror, the very Earth-history he dreamt of writing for the Great Race millions of years ago:

No eye had seen, no hand had touched that book since the advent of man to this planet. And yet, when I flashed my torch upon it in that frightful abyss, I saw that the queerly pigmented letters on the brittle, aeon-browned cellulose pages were not indeed any nameless hieroglyphs of earth’s youth. They were, instead, the letters of our familiar alphabet, spelling out the words of the English language in my own handwriting. (406)

This single moment of textual recognition signifies a mis-en-abyme for Peaslee; it is the moment when the library finally loses its centre and circumference, dissolving all hypertopian discourse into the non-discourse of the other. Peaslee’s rediscovery of his own handwriting in the Central Archives, a trace of his presence in the very place where it should not exist, is what brings about this shift. According to Maurice Levy’s analysis of the story, “when, on those records infinitely older than the human species, [Peaslee] recognizes his own handwriting—he slides and falls into new abysses, toward primordial horrors” (68). In any other context, Peaslee’s written record of his own identity and history would serve as a

hypertopian tribute, a bulwark against the threat of negation posed by the nonhuman cosmos, and one which could potentially survive all historical upheavals. Instead, his *signature* becomes the inverse of this: a monstrous cipher of human finitude in the face of an alien space and time.

The library's discourses of knowledge are here turned against the human; Peaslee's assertion of presence, his only defence against the nonhuman, is reduced to the status of a mere object of research, contained within a library which bars all human access. Sorensen, noting that the text confirms Peaslee's "status as an ethnographical object" for a host of alien researchers, also points out that "[a] document that should stand as a confirmation of Peaslee's place within his particular "culture stream" instead becomes proof of his commerce with, and possession by, the other" (517). Looked at in this light, Peaslee's possession by the alien intelligence earlier in the story is shown to be the more secondary form of possession; even after the secondary personality leaves his body, it remains in possession of his language and writing, directing him towards the moment in which his "commerce... with the other" is revealed to him. This suggests also that all previous attempts to categorise the alien possessor within discourses of mythology and psychiatry were leading Peaslee astray. Certeau states that any attempt to situate voices of the possessed within institutional discourse causes that discourse to itself become possessed. Citing the demon in text, he suggests, makes text itself a monster:

what is cited is fragmented, used over again and again and patched together in a text. Therein it is altered. Yet in this position where it keeps nothing of its own, it remains capable, as in a dream, of bringing forth something uncanny; the surreptitious and altering power of the repressed. (251)

Thus, even as Peaslee objectifies the other through writing about it in psychiatric journals, this process of textualisation also engenders the reverse: the nonhuman other objectifies the

human through being cited, emerging out of the text to wrest control of meaning and discourse. “I flashed on the light and looked at the page as a serpent’s victim may look at his destroyer’s eyes and fangs,” says Peaslee (401). Such a metaphor summarises the way the weird library alters human experience of its heterotopia: rewriting discourse through its “semantic axis of diabolical texts” (Certeau 258).

## The Nonhuman Archive

I have addressed the way text functions in the weird library as subject to a form of demonism. At this point, I wish to consider further the way this diabolical textuality actually takes shape, how it is both conceived by weird fiction and experienced by the mode’s characters. As I have already argued, the nonhuman pathways of text are not unresponsive to human action or involvement. On the contrary, they possess a dark vitality, a will to extend their domain throughout heterotopian space that borders on the insatiable. Consequently, nonhuman textuality in the weird library will often use positive human discourses of knowledge as something like a lure, tempting the human to build on them. Positioning reader-characters like prey before springing their trap, weird libraries move from hypertopia to hypotopia in an instant, relegating human characters to a footnote in an alien narrative beyond their comprehension. Once caught in this trap, and faced with the textual void that reveals itself, characters lose their humanity. They find themselves drawn into the void, made a part of its space and reality. Ultimately, the weird library stages a reformulation of the heterotopia in which the human *becomes text*.

Two stories which clearly illustrate the stages of this becoming are H. P. Lovecraft’s seminal “The Call of Cthulhu” and Thomas Ligotti’s “Nethescurial.” These tales, although written over fifty years apart, are bound together in their treatment of one thing: the archive, and specifically the dangers involved in excavating the archive. Weird fiction’s treatment of



the archive represents a more discursively entangled engagement with library materials and research. That is, I would argue that weird archive stories generally dramatise their heterotopian conflicts in even more theorised fashion than do most other weird library narratives.

Additionally, the stories are complimentary in terms of how they assess the phenomenological value of the archive: a reality-effect in which reality bleeds into text, and vice versa. This parallel has been previously noted by S. T. Joshi in his discussion of Ligotti's early output and influences. Specifically, Joshi regards "Nethescurial" as representing "a very subtle—perhaps even unconscious—adaptation" of "The Call of Cthulhu" (*The Modern Weird Tale* 251). Moreover, he asserts that "the basic pattern of Lovecraft's story is the gradual transformation of words into reality," and that "Nethescurial" "adapts this pattern and in a sense even surpasses it" (*The Modern Weird Tale* 251). Although Joshi's appreciation delves no deeper into the semiotic undercurrents of both tales, his comparison provides a portal into further discussion concerning the basis for this textual transformation of reality.

In heterotopian terms, this transformation can be viewed as exactly the kind of hypertopian-to-hypotopian slippage typically found in the weird library. However, the idea behind Joshi's remark—words *becoming* reality—also suggests another point concerning this slippage: that words and heterotopian reality are somehow connected in a way that precedes the transformation itself. As I will go on to argue, this connection relates to the way text is presented, in Foucault's terms, as a *mirror* for reality: it forms the speculum through which the human locates itself in desirably utopian relation to the world. In weird fiction however, the mirror of text always inverts this polarity, transfiguring utopian reflection into the dystopian, and transporting the human into the space of the monstrous nonhuman.

In "The Call of Cthulhu," the story begins with the protagonist, Francis Wayland Thurston, endeavouring to catalogue his deceased grand-uncle's records. Thus, the tale is

initially set up as a contestation of the archive's heterotopian value: Thurston seeks to convert the voided hypotopian currency of his relative's papers into a hypertopian locus, one that stands as a tribute to the deceased's human identity. These efforts, however, lead him to discover an archive of his relative's investigations into a malign cult, devoted to bringing about the resurrection of the extraterrestrial deity, Cthulhu. Attempting to ascertain the validity of this esoteric research, Thurston develops an obsession with following the trail of his uncle's quest, repeating it to its absolute conclusion. Crucially, this turn towards an obsessive and pathological reading seems to be beyond Thurston's control. His actions appear instead to be a result of his exposure to the documents of the catalogue he is assembling, texts which guide him towards the discovery of their horrific secret, the actual existence of Cthulhu. As a result, the documents also form something of a mirror for Thurston; looking into them too closely results in his *mirroring* his uncle, following the same research pathway, and coming to the same desperate end. Text hijacks Thurston's attempt to project his vision of hypertopian tribute, reflecting instead a repetition of the same benighted trajectory towards the monstrous nonhuman. Through inheriting this archive of textual ephemera, Thurston is also, through no conscious design on his own part, made to inherit his uncle's fate, culminating in his own death at the hands of the cult.

Similarly, in Ligotti's "Nethescurial," the unnamed narrator retrieves a manuscript from the cellars of a library, a document describing the quest of a similar cult to regain the lost pieces of their god's idol (the *Nethescurial* of the title). Developing a fixation with reducing the narrative's stylistic contrivances to their basic pattern, the narrator attempts to uncover the hidden meanings behind them. As in Lovecraft's tale, the narrator here is attempting to recolonise long-neglected textual territory. His goal is to make the document once more a part of hypertopian discursive terrain, to re-place it within the corpus of the wider archive, and to plant his own flag upon it as a tribute to human scholarship. Initially

treating the narrative as allegorical, the narrator, like Thurston, soon finds himself reading the manuscript as if it documented real events. This alteration in reading habits appears not to derive from his own desire to read in a more holistic fashion but seems, once again, conditioned by the words themselves, as if they were directing him towards the fulfilment of some obscurely nonhuman process. The text of the manuscript, in other words, contravenes the narrator's efforts to place or fix it within the archive's corpus; it *intrudes* between the archivist and his goal, rather than joining them together in harmony. This tale, like "The Call of Cthulhu," climaxes with the narrator being confronted by the omnipresence of the manuscript in his reality, a state of monstrous textuality which subsumes him. "I am not dying in a nightmare," he says at the end, acknowledging through denial that he has become the subject of the horror narrative he has been reading (74). This acknowledgement is also a confirmation of sorts that the narrator has seen his own reflection, and that of his desires, returned to him in monstrous form by the mirror of the manuscript. All illusions of hypertopian recuperation are dissolved by the mirror, which encodes its own hypotopian "nightmare" over everything.

Thus, what is significant about each story's depiction of the archive is the way they alter Foucault's idea of the heterotopian mirror, representing it as a gateway to a dark dimension. In utilising a metaphors of mirroring to explain how heterotopias relate to the utopian imaginary, Foucault argues that experience of utopia and heterotopia forms a "joint experience" ("Of Other Spaces" 4). This experience is all to do with how humans project themselves into space, imprinting it with their desires and hopes for the future:

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. ("Of Other Spaces" 4)

In other words, heterotopias open out onto the imaginary plane of desire and fantasy as much as the real of lived experience. This two-way mirror allows for the heterotopia to remain fluid, maintaining its potential for hypertopian improvement. However, in allowing for such change and fluidity, such mirrors can also *distort* reflection. Mirrors, in general, are not always tailored to mimetically reproducing the human figure; at times, they contain cracks that work to misshape the world and human form into something frightful, a hideous parody of itself. Equally, Foucault's metaphorical heterotopian mirror is just as likely to transport the human beholder to a space which mocks or deforms them. In "The Call of Cthulhu" and "Nethescurial," text in the archive is transformed from a mirror to a portal. It initially works to reconfirm the discourses of subjectivity and knowledge its characters project into it. However, as each narrative progresses, these reflections become fissured, as the characters are less and less able to self-project into the mirror, or to recognise their reflections when they do. Ultimately, these reflections become doorways through which the characters are pulled against their will. This enforced entry into a nonhuman textual dimension ends with their transubstantiation into text: the human *becomes* the nonhuman. To paraphrase Foucault, the mirror of text in the weird archive forces the narrators to see themselves "over there, there where I am not," as "a sort of shadow" out of language ("Of Other Spaces" 4).

### Archival Repetition and the Inhuman-ness of Language

The potential for this textual mirror to become a void is made possible by the weird archive itself; specifically, the violent and highly-pathological nature of its heterotopia. This violence is due to the proximity it sets up between the human archivist on the one hand and the nonhumanness of text on the other. Notable for its excessive textuality—the many records, translations, and inscriptions that form its catalogue—as well as its instrumentality for human purposes, the archive is the ontological ground in which different kinds of agencies, both

human and nonhuman, coincide and interact with each other. Thus, while the archive can on the one hand be considered a static place of research, it can also be thought of liminally in the form of a “*heterogeneous assemblage*” with both human *and* nonhuman components (Bennett 23; original emphasis).

Both Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man assist in illuminating forces hiding in the archive that seem both nonhuman and monstrous. Importantly, each also theorises the relation between human and text, in the archive and elsewhere, as a treacherous form of mirroring. Derrida designates the archive as a space and time in which the materiality of text and the human desire for memory and origin coincide, an encounter which generates its own pathology: *mal de archive* or archive fever. This malady qua text, governed by the irresolvable repetition of a desire for the archive’s secret beginning, results in a search for truth in which the human is necessarily sacrificed. Through their research, the archivist seeks to uncover the traces of a founding figure or author: the uncorrupted and authentic proof of their existence. In doing so, the archivist is exercising a filial devotion to this transcendent yet absent subjectivity, and seeking to secure something of it for themselves. Derrida notes the feverish nature of this undertaking:

It is to have a compulsion, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (*Archive Fever* 91)

Enflamed by this fever, archivists lose themselves to the “erotic simulacrum” of text, the vision of origin that it reflects back to them as one of its “masks of seduction” (*Archive Fever* 11). The archive is thus among the most dangerously bewitching of library heterotopias in weird fiction; its discursive terrain always borders on the pathological and destructive.

For de Man, the horror of archival excavation is tied to the essential inhumanity of language. Life and meaning, for de Man, are games played maliciously on humans by

language: traps in which the human is made to circle the void of language endlessly, repeating the same empty signifiers. Reducible neither to a purely linguistic figure nor a reality external to language, life, says Claire Colebrook following de Man, is “a violent, monstrous and receding force that could neither be read nor reduced to the figures we have of it” (*Blindness and Insight* 143). In other words, language is inimical to the human experience of life in that it produces only figurative conceptions of it, always undercutting those conceptions when they are seemingly within reach. Language and writing act like mirrors for de Man in as much as they reflect the objects of human desire as constantly taking flight, eluding and frustrating all attempts to possess them. For de Man then, text represents the continuous erasure of the human by the caprice of metaphor; human life, even as it is lived, is always already negated in some way by language’s rigged game.

Further, the malign power of language is, for de Man, a symptom of its divinity. That is, the cycles of estrangement and loss it sets up for the human makes it analogous to a god. De Man refers to language’s morbid godhead as the *theotrope*. According to his definition of the theotropic, texts generate their own repetitious cycles through positing two types of readings for humans: (1) a reading which envisions a transcendental reality external to the text which can be perceived through a kind of theological sensation (a sense of the presence of God) and (2) an allegorical reading in which the text produces this image of the transcendent as a linguistic figure and which can be perceived through the reader’s use of “referential judgement” (Miller 21). De Man argues, however, that “[t]he meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can consist only in the *repetition* ... of a previous sign with which it can never coincide” (*Blindness and Insight* 207; original emphasis). Consequently, this referential judgement leads to a kind of nonhuman aporia at the heart of the text—what de Man calls its *undecidability*. For de Man, as for Derrida, textual objects within the archive hold out, like a lure, the illusion of a transcendental presence, tempting the scholar to embark

on a search that can never be completed. De Man equates such theotropic trajectories with a circling of the void in which, according to J. Hillis Miller, “meaning ... tumbles from abyss to abyss into the fathomless depths of language” (79). De Man’s conclusions about language and text have serious consequences for the human experience of heterotopia, a space which itself produces both real and figurative conceptions of life. According to de Man’s model of language, all hope for improvement and hypertopian finality is always receding beyond the grasp of the human. As a heterotopia, the weird archive works to frustrate human desire, holding out the potential of a utopia whilst ultimately estranging its seekers from it.

Ultimately, for both Derrida and de Man, what is monstrous about both archive and text are the cycles of repetition they generate, cycles which engulf the human, and ultimately negate it. In this way, both theorists gesture implicitly to the cyclical nature of heterotopias: spaces like the weird library are governed by the irresolvable confrontation between hypertopia and hypotopia, fullness and emptiness. It is this confrontation between a desiring human subjectivity and the nothingness at the heart of the written sign that both “The Call of Cthulhu” and “Nethescurial” depict in their narratives.

“The Call of Cthulhu” illustrates the abyssal effects produced by a theotropic reading of archival material. Thurston, initially reading the texts of his uncle’s archive as though they signified the presence of their author, eventually arrives at the referential judgement that such texts are allegorical. What they refer to, in Thurston’s mind, is the allegory of Cthulhu as a linguistically constituted figure, a metaphor for the transcendent. When he first encounters the image of the god in the form of an idol, he refers to it first and foremost as a symbol, a “symbol representing a monster” (141).

It is only after having developed a more rounded picture of the narrative of Cthulhu that he begins to see the trap he has fallen into, that the symbol of the monster and the *monster itself* are not so easily disentangled. Having retrieved the final piece of the archival

puzzle, the sailor Johansen's narrative of an actual encounter with Cthulhu at sea, Thurston is forced to consider the terrifying possibility that the entity is external to the text, that the god-head is real rather than metaphorical. However, I would argue that the *more* terrifying possibility is that Cthulhu is neither straightforwardly real nor allegorical, that he is in fact the undecidable product of a theotropic reading, representative of a textual void at its core. The real horror of Cthulhu then is not that he may actually exist, but that this potential existence denotes a spiral of undecidability, one in which the textual labyrinth of readings and counter-readings can never be closed, and merely serves to reiterate the same trajectory of non-meaning. "Was I tottering on the brink of cosmic horrors beyond man's power to bear?" he asks himself towards the end (162). This question—in that it can never be adequately answered—is performative of the undecidability of the encounter with Cthulhu as a transcendent presence. Consequently, Thurston's position in relation to the archival mirror is never secure—he is never given the opportunity to fix his interpretation of Cthulhu in a way that would allow him to rehabilitate Cthulhu-related discourse into a form of knowledge. Such "cosmic horror" can only be thought of as the horror of the human encountering, through the mechanics of the archive, a textual void whose tentacles ensnare them within this theotropic cycle.

In "Nethescorial" matters are slightly different. Here, the narrator interprets the manuscript through an elaboration of the poetics of horror narrative. He remarks on the way language in such narratives relies on the right level of proximity to the horror to which it supposedly refers: "Too close and we may be reminded of an omnipresent evil in the living world ... Too far away and we become even more incurious and complacent than is our usual state" (71). Interestingly, the narrator is demonstrating an awareness of both kinds of theotropic readings, one that privileges the "closeness" of the text to an "omnipresent" reality, the other affirming the way text metaphorises such omnipresence, thereby distancing



itself from it. What he is attempting, it appears, is to gain the right distance from the mirror in order to find the ideal reflection of himself and his discourses: his wish is to extemporise heterotopia through interpretation. This involves producing a translation of the text which synthesises both readings, the literal and the figurative. Through such a synthesis, the narrator hopes to find the right position between such readings, and thus arrive at a “pure language”; as Miller says, quoting de Man, “a language of pure form ‘devoid of the burden of meaning’” (*Blindness and Insight* 79). However, this intralinguistic reading is equally dangerous and complacent. Colebrook argues that translation is always doomed to the failure of repetition, that “[t]he translation of the text is not a faithful progeny of a living ancestor but a persistently obstinate repetition of an already dead original” (146).

Ironically, the narrator *does* achieve the activation of a kind of pure language, a revivification of the original’s decayed anatomy. However, this language is nothing other than a language of death, a language of “obstinate repetition” in which non-meaning rather than meaning is averred (Colebrook 146). In seeking to possess, through the repetitive act of translation, the uncorrupted language of the manuscript, the narrator activates the nonhuman agency of the text itself. The exchange of properties within this archival assemblage is exactly this: possession—it is the narrator who comes to be possessed:

It seemed to be in possession of my house, of every common object ... I could feel it also emerging in myself, growing stronger behind this living face that I am afraid to confront in the mirror. (80)

While he is speaking here of a conventional glass mirror, the implications of the narrator’s words are obvious; his ideal image of himself as the manuscript’s interpreter has been corrupted by the manuscript itself. This brings to mind Certeau’s argument concerning the way the demonical text comes to possess the text of its interpreter through the process of citation. Indeed, “Nethescurial” presents a monstrously literal acting-out of such possession

by text, through the citational method of translation. The uncorrupted original text, released into a state of living undeath through translation, corrupts everything else, repeating its anatomy at the molecular level of subject and object. The possession of the narrator by the pure yet impure language of the manuscript is thus shown to be an effect of the undecidably theotropic nature of translation itself. According to de Man, the “‘untranslatability’ of translation ‘‘will inhabit anybody who in his turn will try to translate it’’” (*The Resistance to Theory* 86). Not only is the narrator inhabited by this void of undecidability; he himself comes to inhabit its aporia by becoming a part of its cycle of repetition. Importantly, this theotropism must be thought of as a concomitant of textual, as well as human, agency. In so far as heterotopian libraries are sanctified spaces, spaces which according to Foucault remain “‘nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred,’’ text can be thought of as the god-like presence which instils these spaces with a kind of will beyond that of the human (“‘Of Other Spaces’’ 2).

The final stage in the archival encounter between human and nonhuman in both stories is the reader’s subsumption into the nonhuman singularity of the text. What transpires is a form of textual becoming for the reader, a mis-en-abyme in which the human component within the assemblage of the archive recedes into the nonhuman, effectively fusing with it. In other words, the mirrors through which the characters sought to externalise their visions of archival utopia come alive, dissolving the truth-seekers into the nonhuman of text.

Thurston, press-ganged into the search for an ever-retreating theotrope, the untraceable source of Cthulhu’s ‘call,’ eventually becomes a textual trace himself within the archive. Like the dead Johansen and his grand-uncle before him, his last act of agency as a human being is to consign his will and testament—the very narrative we have been reading—alongside the remains of the previous authors:

I have placed it [Johansen's narrative] in the tin box beside the bas-relief and the papers of Professor Angell. With it shall go this record of mine—this test of my own sanity, wherein is pieced together that which I hope may never be pieced together again. (169)

The horrific nature of this becoming-text is the way it registers an unbecoming of the human, a process in which they exercise no control and are rendered as puppets of this monstrously textual will. In other words, the price that Thurston must pay for this becoming is the shedding of his finite humanity, to become a footnote in the immensity of the archive, grist to the mill of its continuance: "As my uncle went, as poor Johansen went, so shall I go" (169). That all trace of the secret has vanished with its human discoverers does not mean the end of the search however. Rather, it signifies the search's irresolvable recurrence. The story gestures to this fact with its subtitle: "Found among the papers of the late Francis Wayland Thurston of Boston" (139). In heterotopian terms, Thurston becomes part of the discourse he sought to propagate; his words and narrative become a part of the space of the archive, a thing to be read and interpreted anew.

In "Nethescurial," the narrator also experiences an abyssal dissolution of his humanness by way of the nonhuman mirror of text. The encounter with the monstrous void of the manuscript climaxes with the wraith-like appearance of the Nethescurial god itself, emerging out of the text as a result of the narrator's attempt to burn it in the fire. In this case, the mirror of text literally becomes a portal, a doorway through which the personified demons of text can pass into the real world. Ironically, the narrator's destructive act is exactly what allows this monstrous textuality to survive, to be *released*. "Survival," argues Colebrook, "occurs by way of destruction ... A text can only live on through a repetition that releases its frozen, seemingly closed, poetic or sacred unity" (148). The narrator's shattering of the mirror releases the frozen presence of Nethescurial trapped on the other side. The narrator is thus forced to admit his unintentional complicity with a repetitious cycle of becoming, in

which humanness is always a victim of the text's self-extending trajectory. Such a cycle denotes a kind of textual survival at the price of human life: too late, the narrator realises that the text "had invaded the author's crabbed script of blackish green and survived there, waiting to crawl into another lost soul who failed to see what dark places he was wandering into" (83). Once again, the heterotopia of the weird archive transforms the human into a component of its discursive space. As the next lost soul in this sacrificial chain of human authorship, the narrator experiences an erasure of his subjectivity, the price for his becoming-Nethescurial:

The shape is not drawing something out of me and putting something else in its place, something that seems to be bleeding into the words I write. And my pen is not growing bigger in my hand, nor is my hand growing smaller, smaller. (84)

The erasure of subjectivity represented here can also be considered the moment in which the narrator comes to possess absolutely, and at an "infinite" cost, the secret of the archive (Derrida 100). As Derrida has claimed of such an attainment, "the very success of the dig must sign the effacement of the archivist: *the origin then speaks by itself*" (*Archive Fever* 92; original emphasis). The revelation of this naked origin is achieved through an equally absolute extinguishment of the narrator's humanity. Ultimately, the "effacement" of the archivist by Nethescurial is enacted through his literally *becoming* the secret, the process of "drawing something out of me and putting something else in its place" that he speaks of at the very end. The archive, initially hinting at a limitless utopian reservoir for recovering truth, reveals itself to be a hypotopian abyss which sucks the archivist into its infinite corpus.

## Conclusion

Far from being sedimented, frozen like Foucault's image of the archive's "indefinitely accumulating time," the discourses and ideologies of the weird's heterotopian library are

never passive in their dialogue with humans. On the contrary, such discourses are not only active but aggressively manipulative; they guide human library browsers into what seems to be the apex of an anthropocentric utopian vision, before pulling the rug out from beneath them to expose the curdled narrative of ruin underlying it. In the stories discussed above, what mediates the slippage of hypertopia into hypotopia, and therefore human into nonhuman, are the texts of the libraries involved: Thurston's "papers," and the *Nethescurial* manuscript. While ostensibly the cornerstone of the library's human narrative—its schema for legitimising human centrality in a world made for us—texts refuse to be curtailed in service to such artificial utopian fictions. Further, they are also represented as the residing place for nonhuman interlopers. Whether material, like the rot, dust, and fungus of "Out of Copyright" and "A Contaminated Text," or the overtly demonic agencies in "The Call of Cthulhu" and "Nethescurial," such interlopers carry with them narratives of their own, life cycles which reduce human life to a footnote or wipe it out entirely. Weird fiction's library reminds us that the heterotopia is never stable in the kinds of spatial experience it makes possible and liveable: even the most comfortable, ideologically consistent spaces are prone to have their stories hijacked by nightmare.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Shadows and Portents: Affect and Hauntology**

This chapter explores the little-studied, often refuted interzone linking affect theory with hauntology in weird fiction. Weird fiction, as I have argued, theorises structures of meaning through language, circulating around the point where language and speech cease to function in a meaningful, predictable way. However, the weird also theorises much that is pre-linguistic, revealing zones of sensation seeming to exist prior to any language. It is in this capacity that weird fiction exemplifies both an affect and a theory of affect. In other words, as well as being governed by its own kind of affective metamorphoses, the weird also exemplifies a mode of articulating such transformations, and a grammar that can adequately convey their intensity. Weird narratives self-theorise concerning the shortcomings of language in the face of affect, asking whether or not language might yet offer a means for transcending its own limitations. It is through attempting to offer a language of response to the problem of affect that weird fiction also engages with the hauntological. Specifically, weird fiction utilises a spectral idiom to reflect on the lacunae of affective passage. The unnameable bodies of weird fiction—its eldritch Old Ones and tentacular monsters—are not only made visible, or speakable, by this hauntological grammar, but are also shown to be an inviolable part of human history, spectres that can never be exorcised from our narrative.

My use of the term “affect” is derived from Deleuze and Guattari and their works *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), and the later *What is Philosophy?* (1991). However, my interest in applying affect theory to weird fiction lies in tracing the often obscure ground linking affective phenomena to speech and semiosis. The tools and concepts of affect theory can help refine a view of the weird as a form of language, a semiotic which illuminates and sometimes extends the limits of the unspeakable.

Affect theory has frequently been guided by the implicit precept that what is unspeakable, or inaccessible to speech and knowledge, is nonetheless alive with movement and activity. Indeed, for many such theories one of the conditions separating affect from feeling, its closest analogue in human cognition, is that it passes us by too quickly to be captured by our speech. Brian Massumi, in his foreword to the 1987 translation of *A Thousand Plateaus*, defines affect as “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (xvii). The key words in Massumi’s definition here are “prepersonal”—that is, preceding the formation of discrete unities like subject, person and identity—and “passage”—understood as both a movement and a metamorphosis, a passage of alterations irreducible to any epistemology which is not a part of the passage itself. In other words, affect is the unspeakable remainder of the relation and divergence of all bodies, the lifeblood of the intensive liaisons that pass us by almost unnoticed.

For Deleuze and Guattari, affect is the law of bodies, but an unnatural and, indeed, an unlawful law, in that it frequently transgresses the laws that demarcate bodies as autonomous organisms. Affect guides relations and encounters between bodies in terms of a matrix of action and reaction, a machinic continuum whose circuitries are constantly shifting to the noise of life’s chaos. Deriving their radically materialist philosophy from Benedict Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari designate the body as a series of axes along which competing or confederate affects are aligned:

To every relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness grouping together an infinity of parts, there corresponds a degree of power. To the relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual there correspond intensities that affect it, augmenting or diminishing its power to act; these intensities come from external parts or the individual’s own parts.

Affects are becomings. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 283)

The correlation between “affect” and “becoming,” here stated plainly by Deleuze and Guattari, resides in another conceptual pair: the “virtual” and the “actual.” Affect is becoming to the extent to which it partakes in and of the virtual. For Massumi, following Deleuze and Guattari, the virtual signifies a “pressing crowd of incipiences and tendencies ... where futurity combines, unmediated, with pastness, where outsides are infolded, and sadness is happy”; in other words, “a realm of potential” (“The Autonomy of Affect” 224).

However, the virtuality of affect is not opposed to the “actual,” and its corresponding realm of being and cognition, in the manner of a dichotomy. On the contrary, affect’s field of possibility ties it to the actual to the extent that such possibilities are able to become actualized somehow, whether through the coupling of bodies or their separation. Thus, while affect chafes against actuality, and the two-dimensional axis of thinking and feeling that underpins it, it always promises to become a part of it as well, threatening the actual with “the unclassifiable, the unassimilable, the never-yet-felt, the felt for less than half a second, again for the first time – the new” (“The Autonomy of Affect” 227). In this way, affect is the shadow of a promise: the ghost of a lost intensity of feeling haunting the present moment of sensation, it nevertheless whispers of a future when such an intensity *might* be felt.

In the case of the unspeakable, affect and the virtual allow for a radical rethinking of the way all limits, including those of semiotics, can be thought. According to Massumi, the infinite potential of affect is governed by a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; “where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt” (“The Autonomy of Affect” 224). Extrapolating from Massumi’s logic, the division between “experience” and the “felt” also suggests a form of speech that is different from the regulated speech of knowledge and experience. In any case, the coexistence of opposites as the starting point of affective passage at least presupposes the surpassing of a limit in language, one in which concrete meanings lose their speakability. In a language governed by the potential of



affect, one can envision such meanings becoming elusive but also expansive, suggesting a universe of possible connections both dormant and active.

The need for a grammar or semiotic capable in some of way of registering the multiplicity of affect has been noted by Deleuze and Guattari. In *What is Philosophy?* they specifically focus their attention on the work of writers and artists who utilise their aesthetic palettes to create an affectual grammar. “The writer uses words,” they write, in order to create “a syntax that makes them pass into sensation that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry, or even sing” (*What is Philosophy?* 176). In weird fiction, the “stammer” underpins the mode’s tonally sensitive language and syntax, the faltering speech, for example, of the sceptic, forced to believe against their better judgement, and who can no longer permit themselves any certainties. The affective stammer animating William Dyer’s address to the scientific world in Lovecraft’s “At the Mountains of Madness” is an instance of this. “I am forced into speech,” he says, “It is altogether against my will that I give my reasons for opposing this contemplated invasion of the antarctic” (9). Labouring under the weight of an inexpressible awe and terror resulting from his experiences, Dyer also labours under language’s burden, a language operating against the will of the thinker, and a grammar no longer tied to thought but to the tremble of awful sensation. It is the stammer and the tremble which allows affect to sneak through, and to permeate the “standard language” of the tale. Moreover, the irradiation of “standard language” and its certainties does not lead to a corresponding decrease in speech and rhetoric, but rather the inverse—a stretching of speech in an attempt to reintegrate the unnameable into the fold of the nameable. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth note in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, affect of any sort always carries with it a degree of the unnameable, a sense of inexplicable movements taking in “all the miniscule or molecular events of the unnoticed” (2), and which can “leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability” (1). Presenting a gloss on

Deleuze and Guattari's observations on literary writing, Gregg and Seigworth discuss the need for an affective grammar as "a means to articulate, to compose a singularizing aesthetic that captures both the stretchy-processual and the inherently sticky pragmatics of right now, right here" (4). This pre-cognitive immediacy governs much of the weird's affective presentation. It is the "right now, right here" that haunts Dyer's monologue, the nagging present that "forces itself into speech," making the narrative a story that *must* be told, in spite of the "will" of the speaking thinker.

Weird fiction is also obsessed with the worldly "intractability" noted by Gregg and Seigworth. In the introduction to the *The Weird*, Ann and Jeff Vandermeer make the claim that the weird "strives for a kind of understanding even when something cannot be understood, and acknowledges failure as sign and symbol of our limitations" (xv). What is important to note is that this cognitive striving towards meaning and "understanding" is only ever a performance within language, one that is marked by its lack of finality, and in which the failure to speak encourages the striving to speak regardless. In "The Autonomy of Affect," Brian Massumi argues that such strivings must always fail by going too far, that "[l]inguistic expression can [only] resonate with and amplify [affective] intensity at the price of making itself functionally redundant" (219). Weird fiction seeks a mode of expression which can amplify such intensities without the cost of becoming "functionally redundant." That is, it reaches toward an idiom that can perform the passage of affect, without resulting in affect's dispersal, the all too common backwash of speaking too stridently where affect is concerned. Thus, the weird utilises a series of speech acts and modes which, like the weird speech act discussed in Chapter Two, can enunciate that which seemingly defies enunciation, carrying affect into the realm of the perceptible present.

My discussion of the weird affect here is connected to what I referred to, in the introduction, as the need for open-ended dialogue in discussing weird fiction, a manner of

criticism which would circumvent the at-times suffocating terminologies of genre in favour of an approach in line with Lovecraft's "listening." Consequently, the chapter is partially inspired by Roland Barthes's analysis of what he called the "Neutral," or "a structural creation that would defeat, annul, or contradict the implacable binarism" demanded by the world of meaning and its paradigms (*The Neutral* 7). Specifically, Barthes advocated the disruption of paradigms—structures which dictate meaning through positing a this-or-that choice between two opposing terms—"by means of a third term" (*The Neutral* 7). This term, Barthes theorised, would refuse any hard and fast dualisms, outwitting them by inhabiting the spaces between them. Integral to the sense of play he is advocating with the "Neutral" would be a "hyperconsciousness of the affective minimum," an understanding of the way "affective moments" are marked by "changeability," or a subtle conjugation of "shimmers" and "nuances" (*The Neutral* 101).

Weird fiction's affective grammar is similarly marked by a "hyperconsciousness of the affective minimum," a Neutrality bound to the "shimmers" and "nuances" between discreet states and names. Thus, one of my main arguments is that the unspeakability of the weird is indicative of its nearly-infinite speakability. Unspeakability implies an infinite potential, a capacity to take multiple forms in speech, text and thought, and to likewise generate affect in ways as yet unthought of. In the weird, terms such as "unspeakable," "unthinkable," or "unnameable" signify the Neutral opening-up of expressibility, not its closure. Moreover, the weird is itself a mode of speculation concerning language's limit of expressibility, a speculation which it undertakes by providing a language of affect. If such a thing as the "weird affect" exists then, it may be thought as the passage of intensities within and through the language of its narratives, an excluded middle in which the two halves of the paradigm, speakable and unspeakable, intertwine momentarily before unravelling.

Accompanied by a cognitive striving, the weird affect traverses the middle ground between the limits of the expressible and that which lies beyond the limits, yet always haunts them. The weird is bound to a dialogue in which the expressible and inexpressible seem to speak, listen, and haunt each other, haunting the reader in the process. As writer Michael Moorcock has suggested, one of the greatest virtues of weird tales is “precisely that they leave you with many more questions than answers” (xii). One needs only to think of Lovecraft’s “Supernatural Horror in Literature” to recall that the “one test of the really weird is simply this ... of contact with unknown spheres and powers; *a subtle attitude of awed listening*” (427; my emphasis). It could be argued that Lovecraft is inadvertently discussing affect here in terms characteristic of a haunting, of “subtle” nuances of “contact” and “listening,” regulated by a sensitivity to minimal states and their “half-told, half-hinted horrors” (424). According to the Vandermeers, the object of the weird affect’s awe and terror—the being, entity, or teratological *It*—is less important to the mode itself than the spectral dialogue it sets up with its “listening” character: “Whether *It* exists or not, they have fallen into dialogue with *It*; they may pull back from the abyss, they may decide to *unsee* what they saw, but still they *saw* it” (xv; original emphasis).

The concatenation of moments inscribed in this “dialogue,” moments of disquieting backward-glances and future speculations—*did I see what I saw?* followed by *will I see more?*—is indicative of what, I argue, can be called the *hauntology* of the weird. Rather than taking the anthropomorphic ghost of gothic fiction as its haunt, weird fiction configures haunting as, in Gregg and Seigworth’s terms, a “bloom-space” of affective encounters (12). The revenants of the weird are not those of murdered lovers or the revengers of cursed dynasties. They are, rather, the spectres of abstract possibility, the shadows of the virtual haunting the real, and the inexpressible ghosts disturbing language. Further, they are the spectres of unanswered questions, questions which, despite (or perhaps because of) their lack

of answers, continue to proliferate—*what-ifs?* fading into *what-nexts?* in a conflux of “thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs” (Gregg and Seigworth 4). In many ways, the weird returns hauntology to a site similar to that which Derrida first imagined for it: a zone which requires its characters to “learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation,” and in dialogue without end (*Specters of Marx* xviii).

## Weird vs. Hauntology: The Binarism of China Miéville

In Chapter One I discussed China Miéville’s definition of the weird as a kind of sentient contingency that looks at us from behind the veil of the world, or, as he puts it, the “worldweave” (1115). What separates weird fiction from other genres or modes of speculative fiction, according to Miéville, is that its image of the world is “unfinished” and “ill-made” (“Afterweird” 1115); instead of conceiving a world and a set of rules and mythologies, the weird pulls the rug out from beneath the very concept of world-engineering in genre.

The genius of Miéville’s theory is that it does something interesting with Joshi’s earlier claim that the weird is the “*consequence of a world view*” (*The Weird Tale* 1; original emphasis). For Miéville, the weird is not some consequence of the philosophical views of an author, but rather the nonhuman “view” or vantage point behind the semblance of the ordered world and cosmos:

The dwellers in the holes [of the world] are not punishments. That they watch is as random as a rip, the shape of threadbareness. That is the Weird: that we are watched from holes. You feel eyes on you. Weird is an affect. We know it when we feel it. (“Afterweird” 1115)

Over and against the views of those within the world, Miéville’s weird is a consequence of that gaze being returned from somewhere beyond the ken of the worldly and the commonplace. Weird fiction, therefore, is not constitutive of anything allegorical, but a

theorisation of this returned gaze, a narrative whose trappings distil something affective passing through the world's many "holes."

Given the strength of this definition of the weird as affect, it might be expected that Miéville would return to elaborate on the affective minimum of this sensation of the gaze elsewhere in his critical work. His contention that the affective potential of the weird can simply be registered in knowing it "when we feel it" doesn't seem a satisfactory point on which to end an analysis of the affective moment. Indeed, it has the unfortunate side-effect of bypassing the moment altogether, of excluding the middle of its perception, the liminal state before it passes into knowledge. We might very well "know it when we feel it," but this sensation surely exists prior to the point when it becomes an object for thought and cognition. As Massumi has claimed with respect to the pre-cognitive moment of affective sensation, it exists "in so pure and productive a receptivity that it can only be conceived as a third state, an excluded middle, prior to the distinction between activity and passivity" of thought ("The Autonomy of Affect" 225). As I mentioned earlier, weird fiction theorises the gap between dumbstruck passivity and active cognition as a series of speech acts, a way of speaking which is marked by the unspeakable, but also marks it, lassoing it into speech.

Exemplary as it is, Miéville's analysis skips over this "excluded middle" between affect and cognition. Though he isolates the reciprocal beginning of the encounter, the weird's potential "capacity to affect and be affected," he does not discuss how this occurs, and the question, asked by Gregg and Seigworth, that must necessarily follow on: "How does a body, marked in its duration by these various encounters with mixed forces, come to shift its affections (its being-affected) into action (capacity to affect)?" (2). As much as weird fiction is accompanied by its own forms of knowledge and reality-effects, it is also about violently disrupting the world-ness upon which such knowledges are founded. According to Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?*, affect and cognition co-exist as "becomings of

sudden petrification or infinite acceleration” (169); their relation in weird fiction is performatively one of passage and impasse, stammering and silence, depending on which force has the upper hand. Miéville can be excused for glossing over this process, since it was clearly never his intention to take the weird’s analogy with affect so far. Nonetheless, his comments open up a pathway for further discussion on the way weird fiction embodies affect, and indicates certain kinds of affective relationships between bodies in the sense spoken of by Deleuze and Guattari.

On the surface, Miéville’s remarks concerning the weird’s affective “gaze” seem to suggest a parallel with another strain of theory. I would argue that the language of his discussion invokes, consciously or not, a comparison with Derrida’s hauntology. On the basest level, to be looked at from an invisible gap in the fold of the world—a gaze, moreover, belonging to something equally outside the life of the world of meaning—implies a haunting of sorts. In addition to signifying a simple visitation—the apparition of a ghost which returns to haunt a place—haunting itself is also attached to a series of affects. In its most abstract sense, haunting implies an intrusion, a remainder of meaning unassimilable to thought but which nonetheless harries it, generating a multitude of questions as to the source of what haunts. As I will argue, such questions are affective in that they are unanswerably ephemeral, an effect of the fleetingness of their moment. Haunting need not have an object as such, but can arise from thought’s inability to fix itself in relation to what it questions. The what, why, how and when of being haunted signify what could be thought of as a language game of affect, a troubling of thought which is mapped out in the circumlocutions of language. The hypothetical spectre emerging from this game continues to disturb thought, yet, like the unnameable, is also sustained by thought’s vain attempts to fathom it through language. As much as it represents an intrusion on the incorporeal body of thought, haunting is also a supplementary projection *from* thought.

However, in his two other major works on the weird—a chapter on weird fiction in the *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, and, more notably, his article “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire”—Miéville is unequivocal regarding hauntology’s opposition to everything the weird stands for. He argues that weird fiction and hauntological fiction represent two divergent responses to the chaos of modernity, to the horrors of “crisis-blasted” capitalism “showing its true face” (“Weird Fiction” 128). This divergence rests in their orientation towards the human, and to human history. Miéville associates hauntology’s ghost with an uncanny “return of the repressed,” a “human rebuke” of history whose principle avatar is the vengeful shade (“Quantum Vampire” 128). Such a being, for Miéville, is always reliant on an anthropomorphic guilt, a “radicalised uncanny” in which the unquiet dead return to haunt the living after having “undergone repression” (“Quantum Vampire” 112). Haunting is always tied to the question of “when,” and the thinkability of a historical past that, while occluded by repression, can be recovered and exorcised. Thus, hauntology, for Miéville, becomes synonymous with the haunting found in any ghost story, weird or otherwise.

Miéville’s weird, on the other hand, is not associated with any repressed past, but is tied instead to the radical, ungraspable present. “The Great Old Ones,” weird fiction’s paradigmatic entities, “neither haunt nor linger” as the residue of an unassimilated past (“Quantum Vampire” 112): their existence, rather, “impregnates the present with a bleak, unthinkable novum” (“Weird Fiction” 513). The weird is not a “stain” upon history, or a Derridean “dis-joining” of the present, but the untimely rupturing of both:

The Weird is not the return of any repressed: though always described as ancient, and half-recalled by characters from spurious texts, this recruitment to invented cultural memory does avail Weird monsters of Gothic’s strategy of revenance, but back-projects their radical unremembered alterity into history, to en-Weird ontology itself. (“Quantum Vampire” 112-13)



While ghosts can be exorcised, there is to be no exorcising the “Great Old Ones.” Their rupturing of the present signifies, for Miéville, an estrangement of time from itself and from anything remotely human. Furthermore, the weird’s unthinkability, unlike the hauntological, is for Miéville a side-effect of its teratology. While the form of the ghost, despite being intangible, can always be categorised in terms of a human morphology, the weird being’s form is implacably other. Amorphous, viscous, and categorically unstable, the weird’s “eldritch, oozing, tentacled thing” is equally formless and overformed: it corresponds to a surfeit of forms and guises, while at the same time having no one original form which could signify a biological beginning (“Quantum Vampire” 116). The weird comes to signify the horrific “touchability” of matter, in contradistinction to the usually intangible ghost, which is bound to the gaze or the look.

While I initially found Miéville’s distinction between the weird and the hauntological convincing, and a timely attempt at genre specificity within the fantastic, I soon found myself questioning the staunchness of the binary. Ultimately, Miéville’s “oppositional dyad” feels too governed by paradigm logic, a binarism deaf to the resonances which might cause the weird and the hauntological to affectively combine into a third term (123). While his conclusion to “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire” does soften the distinction by making the weird and the hauntological co-extensive (“Opposed but not separable, the traces of the Weird are inevitably sensible in a hauntological work, and vice versa”), the article still seems to lack a Barthesian neutrality, and the speculative verve that made the afterword to *The Weird* so refreshing (128). Further, while Miéville’s outlook may have changed between the two pieces, the degree to which they fail to speak to each other makes them appear to manifest entirely different approaches to the weird.

This discontinuity is illustrated most clearly in a point on affect. While arguing in the essay for the teratological and the tactile as the primary affects of weird-ness, Miéville

neglects the very thing that would have brought the weird and hauntological together: the *look*. Jean-Paul Sartre prefigures affect theory's emphasis on fluidity, and of its dissolution of subject-object oppositions, when he defines the look as a form of *making-present*. The look of the Other "confers spatiality upon me," claims Sartre, and further that, "to apprehend oneself as looked-at is to apprehend oneself as a spatializing-spatialized" (357). However, this spatializing assemblage of the look also constitutes a radical alienation of the subject for Sartre:

I am thrown into the universal present in so far as the Other makes himself a presence to me.

But the universal present in which I come to take my place is a pure alienation of my universal present; physical time flows toward a pure and free temporalization which I am not (357)

Similar to Miéville's characterization of the weird, the Sartrean look makes the subject conscious of their own objectification in the world. Moreover, the look in Sartre's philosophy is also defined by a spectrality, a hidden-ness which is felt rather than seen by the object of the look. Specifically, the look "never refer[s] ... to the actual eye of the hidden watcher" (346); indeed, "far from perceiving the look on the objects which manifest it, my apprehension of a look turned toward me appears on the ground of the destruction of the eyes which "look at me" (346). In other words, the eyes of the Other are always elided from the scene of the look, while the gaze itself remains as an affect, cast out of nowhere as a nothingness which threatens the subject with erasure. While Sartre eventually strips away all affect from the look, tying it to the Existentialist concerns of shame and human "value judgments" (358), he nonetheless isolates the connection between the look and the haunt in a manner commensurate with the weird affect: "To be looked at is to apprehend oneself as the unknown object of unknowable appraisals" (358).

At this point, it might be asked of Miéville's essay: where is the disquieting image of being-looked-at that he made so essential to the weird encounter in his afterword? While look

and touch do not cancel each other out as affective possibilities, Miéville's failure to mention the look at all in "M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire" feels like a missed opportunity. Part of my approach in this chapter is informed by a wish to take up the threads of Miéville's two works and tie them together, thereby softening the polarity he sets up between the weird and the hauntological. In this respect, affect theory provides an alternative way of theorising this difference. It invokes a neutrality, a middle ground between weird and hauntology hitherto excluded from his discussion.

In fairness to Miéville, his dismissal of the hauntological undercurrent in weird fiction correlates with his reaction against the weird being reduced to the Gothic. This reaction is similar to a position argued at an earlier date by S. T. Joshi, who criticised David Punter in *The Weird Tale* for holding just such a reductionist view (3). That the weird entity has so often been reduced to a Gothic revenant is, in Miéville's view, the consequence of a category mistake to which the weird has long been subjected. His insistence that "the heuristic edges of the weird and the hauntological ... stay sharp" ("Quantum Vampire" 113) is borne of a wish to do justice to the weird canon's bestiary: such "[t]eratological specificity demands attention" in order to ensure that a ghost is not confused with an Old One ("Quantum Vampire" 114).

Miéville is quite correct in his assertion that "Weird writers were explicit about their anti-Gothic sensibility" ("Quantum Vampire" 113). However, I would argue that to align haunting and hauntology exclusively with the gothic figure of the ghost is in itself a category error arising from mistaking the part for the whole: haunting, above all, denotes an intensive field, taking in relationships between and around bodies. The "Gothic's strategy of revenance," with its human ghosts and their oedipal subtexts, is certainly not of weird fiction. However, this is to assume that revenance and haunting *are* solely the domain of the Gothic. Even Derrida, while frequently utilising the term "ghost" in *Specters of Marx*, admitted that

the “specter or the revenant” of hauntology is always to be distinguished from the “ghost in general” (7). The assumption that haunting can be captured by a commonplace figure of genre is highly questionable. To do so would be to overlook the network of affect that haunting engenders, a network that subsumes multiple bodies in a shared encounter rather than emanating from one source alone: the ghost and its legacy. It is this point—the sidelining of the look coupled with the erasure of hauntology from the weird’s lexicon—that represents my greatest departure from Miéville. Arguably, Miéville’s opposing of weird and hauntology requires him, for more than one reason, to avoid examining the look too closely. This is precisely because looking, seeing and being seen, belong to the realm of the hauntological in the way Derrida himself intended.

While never actually using the term “affect” in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida was undoubtedly attuned to the affective potential of the hauntological. Among all its other virtues, *Specters of Marx* argued for haunting as the governing necessity of being-in-the-world, an inescapable condition of reality around which human beings must construct a language of response. Although Derrida diagnosed the source of ontological haunting as stemming from the refusal of Marxism, the actual experience of such haunting exceeds the political specificity of such a beginning. Intriguingly, Derrida saw the haunted world in terms similar to Miéville’s own: human ontology, according to Derrida, is riddled with spaces through which something looks at us:

*It is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or dead. Here is—or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, some thing, ‘this thing,’ but this thing and not

any other, this thing that looks at us, that concerns us ... , comes to defy semantics as much as ontology (*Specters of Marx* 6; original emphasis)

This passage is remarkable for the unquantifiable image it paints of the revenant. Emerging from a hidden elsewhere beyond knowledge, this haunting “thing” does not simply confuse the categories of living and dead, natural and supernatural, making them interstitial in the manner of Gothic fiction: it explodes them utterly. In defying semantics and ontology, Derrida’s unnameable spectre has far more in common with the Lovecraft’s eldritch alien gods than any ghost from the Gothic tradition.

Further, Derrida’s hauntology affirms a point explicitly denied by Miéville: the weird entity is fundamentally a part of human history and temporality. Cthulhu and the rest of the weird pantheon are spectral—hauntological—*because* they are tied to the excluded moments of human history. Rather than emerging through gaps in Miéville’s worldweave, such weird phantoms represent the entirety of history as something of a gap in itself, a narrative stained with traces of the unthinkable alien. In this way, one of the primary functions of Lovecraft’s fiction was to depict human histories as contaminated in advance by unrecoverable otherness. In “At the Mountains of Madness,” the narrative of human evolution is rendered an accident of inattention and neglect, a result of cells “escaping beyond the radius of [the Old Ones] attention” and “suffered to develop unchecked” (88). Again, in “The Shadow Out of Time,” perhaps the pre-eminent story of weird temporality, the history of Earth and human development is reduced to a footnote in the cosmic annals of an alien race. Not only has this history been authored in advance by the Great Race, who can jump from present to past to future at will, this historical narrative is also easily doctored, edited at any point in accordance with their wishes (“With this aeon-embracing knowledge, the Great Race chose from every era and life form such thoughts, arts, and processes as might suit its own nature and situation”) (365).

The point is that the affective moment of the weird encounter is not, as Miéville argues, a rupturing of the present. Rather, it is the disclosure that the present is always haunted by something outside of its horizon or frame. Derrida's "non-present present" is the affective moment par excellence, in that it gestures to a zone of exclusion: a locus of becoming lying between the past-present and future-present, yet always fading into and out of them. The "non-present present" does not need to be "impregnated" by the weird's "unthinkable novum," since it is *already* "unhinged" from knowledge, infused with a confounding "*non-contemporaneity*" (*Specters of Marx* xix; original emphasis). If, as Miéville claims, the worldweave is already threadbare, then history and ontology are always already contaminated: there is no "en-weirding" backwash, precisely because history and ontology are themselves infinitely weird from the start. The moment of weird affect then, is this: a "non-present present" in which history and temporality show their true faces as monstrously abstract, inhuman forces.

Finally, as I have already suggested, the weird, despite being unknowable, is not, as Miéville would have it, unthinkable. Rather, it engenders a language of speculation, of unanswerable questions that surround the affective encounter, pushing thought itself towards the unknown quanta of affect. As Derrida conjectures, "what sense would there be to ask the question 'where?' 'where tomorrow?' 'whither?'" (*Specters of Marx* xix). And yet, despite lacking any sense, these questions *do* come. We must ask questions in the face of such strangeness: even when answers are unattainable, still our questioning is "[t]urned toward the future, going toward it, it also comes from it, it proceeds from ... the future" (*Specters of Marx* xix). Weird tales enact a questing (and questioning) dialogue with this present-future, maintaining a receptivity to it which, like Derrida's own treatise on the spectral, "advances like an essay in the night—into the unknown of that which must remain to come" (*Specters of Marx* xviii). The hauntology of the weird abstracts the spectre from its human or Gothic point

of origin. Further, it carries it into the unknown, an affective point of indetermination in which all that is certain is the extreme of sensation, of becoming. Such zones of “indiscernability” are, for Deleuze and Guattari, defined by

an extreme contiguity within a coupling of two sensations without resemblance or, on the contrary, in the distance of a light that captures both of them in a single reflection. ... as if things, beasts, and persons ... endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation. (*What is Philosophy?* 173)

In hauntological terms, weird fiction often blurs the boundary between the looker and looked-at, effecting a transformation which returns each to a point preceding their formulation as discrete entities. In this way, weird fiction reflects on the “indiscernability” mediating the relation between the haunter and the haunted. Threaded through with affect, this relation traces a gap between the two which is slowly bridged until complicity is revealed, an encounter in which *becoming-haunted* is always only a whisker away from *becoming-spectre*.

### Spectral Subjects: H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Outsider”

The zone of indiscernibility between haunted and haunter is explored in detail in Lovecraft’s early tale “The Outsider.” Written, like much of his pre-“*The Call of Cthulhu*” fiction, in a style redolent of Poe’s proto-decadence, “The Outsider” eschews the language of supernatural realism found in his more cosmic work in favour of a highly affective, dream-like idiom. The tale relates the efforts of an unnamed narrator to recover lost memory, and to leave behind the darkness of the family home, where he has spent the whole of his existence, in the search for light. Light here doubles as both sunlight, the rays of which fail to reach him in the boarded up house of his internment, and the enlightenment of remembrance.

Very little occurs here by way of plot: the story is only seven pages long, and the narrative is flat, with few variations in tension or plot. Instead, the tale resembles something

like an affect-driven prose-poem: an “essay in the night” in which the moment of affect is stretched out into a series of gradations within the narrative. The narrator passes through these threshold moments, the passing through of which colour and deepen his encounter with the not-quite-lost residue of memory. This residue becomes a spectral resonance which, in line with Gregg and Seigworth, “stick[s] to [the] bodies and worlds” of the narrative (1). The opening paragraph can be read as a tableau of bodies, worlds, and memories adhering to each other in a haunting polyphony:

Unhappy is he to whom the memories of childhood bring only fear and sadness. Wretched is he who looks back upon lone hours in vast and dismal chambers with brown hangings and maddening rows of antique books, or upon awed watches in twilight groves of grotesque, gigantic, and vine-encumbered trees that silently wave twisted branches far aloft. Such a lot the gods gave to me—to me, the dazed, the disappointed; the barren, the broken. And yet I am strangely content, and cling desperately to those sere memories, when my mind momentarily threatens to reach beyond to the other. (43)

The narrator is here plagued by the nightmare of life, and broken by the vastness of its moments. And yet, broken-ness, barrenness, disappointment, and desolation are all mediated here by the blooming of an affect of contentment: an imp of the perverse derived from the way his memories, even in their absence, stick to him as a kind of despair-pleasure. Gregg and Seigworth argue that affect is found in “a world’s belonging to a body of encounters but also, in *non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual impossibilities” (2; original emphasis). In Lovecraft’s story, the affective tenor is doubled: the story is governed by both “belonging” and “non-belonging” in a way that synthesises them in the same affective field. While he clings “desperately to those sere memories,” he clings also to their absence as a guard against painful recollection, the “reaching beyond to the other” that he so dreads. Elsewhere, he claims “I know not where I was born” and “I cannot recall any person except myself” (43-44). This is not a denial of memory, but an



extension of memory's field: both present and absent, memory subsists midway between composition and decomposition, between remembering and forgetting. Thus, it forms a world built on affect, finite moments cohering for less than a second in actuality but lasting for an eternity nonetheless. Thus, the entirety of life for the "Outsider" takes the form of a non-present present, a moment which is simultaneously filled with memory and empty of it: a *spectral* life.

It could be argued that this tale represents Lovecraft at his most recognisably Gothic; the ancestral castle, with its crypts and their "piled-up corpses of dead generations," suggests that the tale's revenant may be tied to an *unheimlich* return of the repressed, to a guarded secret at once familiar and unfamiliar but of irrevocably human origin (43). But here, such repressed family spectres are absent: the castle itself is empty of all signifiers which could posit a source for the haunting that takes place. Even the "mouldy books," from which the narrator learns all he knows, appear as vacant receptacles for a knowledge that is never elaborated upon (44). Consequently, what makes this tale more weird than Gothic—despite its utilisation of recognisable Gothic motifs—is that its revenants are more nonhuman than human. The spectre of the "The Outsider," like Derrida's abstract phantom, defies semantics and ontology through being irreducible to the human origins of the Gothic. The fact that the narrator's memories are always left in the half-light, never being granted any prospect of revelation, represents a refusal of origin. There is no key or clue that could allow for such memories to be filed away in an archive of guilt or, as Miéville puts it, "human rebuke."

Moreover, in contrast with the transgression-stained histories of Gothic narratives, here there is no sense of a wider framework of human action governing events. "I must have lived years in this place, but I cannot measure the time," claims the narrator, alluding to the temporal blankness of his abode (43). Rather, time is suspended in the occluded moments of its passing, a haunted temporality of affect that moves from question to unanswered question:

from *where am I?* to *who am I?* Spectrality, instead of revealing itself as a cipher for the once-living, permeates the gaps between knowing and not-knowing, festering in the alcoves of the castle without ever coming into view. The castle thus resembles an ambient sensorium of affect: the point where “desolation” and “contentment” intertwine in mutual hauntedness.

Like the castle, the narrator is a blank canvas, an abstract presence denuded of identity and semblance:

I do not recall hearing any human voice in all those years—not even my own; for although I had read of speech, I had never thought to try to speak aloud. My aspect was a matter equally unthought of, for there were no mirrors in the castle, and I merely regarded myself by instinct as akin to the youthful figures I saw drawn and painted in the books. (44)

Among other things, this quotation suggests a temporal lag governing the story, a delay that sharpens the narrative’s relationship to affect. That the narrator alludes here to a period of learning prior to the story, in which he was able to read and study books, suggests the story itself is regulated by a moment lost to time, a spectral blank in its diegesis. This absent moment is the reflection of the face, and specifically the narrator’s identification with that face. The narrator’s sense of visible self is regulated not by any reflection, but by the pictures of human figures he sees in books, simulacrum he assumes a relationship of co-familiarity with. That this moment of proper facial recognition is absent from the story’s world suggests that the story itself is haunted by an absent presence—the reflected “I” held in the gaze of the similarly absent mirror—that it hints at but refuses to show. However, the lack of this moment of reflection generates a certain freedom for the narrator, allowing him to identify with other bodies and forms. Dissociated from the human world, the narrator finds temporary embodiment through an affective conjugation with his dwelling: a *becoming*-castle. His sense of personhood, what little there is of it, is mediated through his connection to the objects of the castle: the pictures in the books which grant him the bare minimum of human likeness,

and the bones of the mausoleum, of which he says “there was nothing grotesque,” but rather an association “with everyday events” (44).

Regardless of the succour that is generated by the mutual composition of the occupant with his dwelling, there is no sense of self that is crystallized by the encounter. The narrator, despite his internal relationship with the castle, is left an “outsider,” a half-person who remains haunted by the residuum of memory. This simultaneous conjunction and disjunction with his surroundings can only reflect the horror of an anxious waiting:

So through endless twilights I dreamed and waited, though I knew not what I waited for. Then in the shadowy solitude my longing for light grew so frantic that I could rest no more, and I lifted entreating hands to the single black ruined tower that reached above the forest into the unknown outer sky. (44)

It is this “longing for light” that leads the narrator to sever his connection with the castle and its elements. The never-ending wait for an absent memory represents an impasse in the affective potential of the castle, a point of timely disconnection in which the bodies of the encounter begin to “wither,” “to contract or retract their powers of affectivity/affectability” (Gregg and Seigworth 13). The narrator’s resolution to ascend the highest tower of his garret is motivated by the promise of affect’s future blooming, a need “to locate that propitious moment when the stretching of (or tiniest tear in) bloom-space could precipitate something more than incremental” (Gregg and Seigworth 12). The desire for light and for life signifies, to employ Gregg and Seigworth’s terms, the way affect opens up into the future as a desirous possibility for new intensities: an “if only” (12).

The narrator’s desire for the new is subject to a more-than-symbolic inversion relating to the house itself and its hierarchies. Gaston Bachelard has defined the house in terms of a “verticality,” one that is “ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic” (17). This polarity is marked by a simple opposition, height and depth: the heights of the attic are identified with

“the rational zone of intellectualized projects,” while the cellar is “the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces” (18; original emphasis). Further, Bachelard defines the inhabitant, or *dreamer*, of the house in terms of their orientation towards height and depth, an orientation guided by a symbolic form of activity: “The dreamer constructs and reconstructs the upper stories and the attic until they are well constructed. ... But for the cellar, the impassioned inhabitant digs and re-digs, making its very depth active” (18). In “The Outsider” however, the polarity between both types of action—construction and digging—is inverted, along with the binary of height and depth accompanying it. It is the lower levels of the house which are associated with construction: the cellar is where the narrator has learned to “construct and reconstruct” all elements of his subjectivity over which he has control—among them, his self-identification with the “youthful figures” in books, and the way he associates “bones and skeletons” with “every-day events” (44).

As well as being subterranean spaces, cellars are also structural foundations, and in “The Outsider” they represent the foundational, yet artificially constructed core of the narrator’s being. On the other hand, the attic, far from being defined as a transcendent or “intellectualized” space in the story, is instead invoked in terms suggesting a frenzied excavation, or a digging to the surface. On making the decision to leave his *cellar-house* behind, the narrator describes the “frantic” thoughtlessness of his ascent towards “the unknown outer sky” (44). Ascent here is not illumined by the light from the surface, but obscured by darkness: “climb as I might, the darkness overhead grew no thinner, and a new chill as of haunted and venerable mould assailed me” (45).

In this way, the house and the narrator’s active relation to it are defined by affect and flux rather than structure and hierarchy. Height and depth, digging and constructing, confuse themselves, switching places according to the position that the narrator comes to occupy within the house’s assemblage. The house and the narrator come to resemble Deleuze and

Guattari's *haecceity*, a nonpersonal, yet radically individuated composition "consist[ing] entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected." (*A Thousand Plateaus* 287-88). The movements within this house-outsider haecceity are vertical, not because of any opposition between height and depth, but because lateral passages are forbidden by the relational longitude of the haecceity. The narrator's ascent is thus a repetition, a "re-dig," of his earlier failed attempt to leave the house via the front door ("Once I tried to escape from the forest, but as I went farther from the castle the shade grew denser and the air more filled with brooding fear") (44). In so far as the narrator can exercise an optimal power, or latitude, in his movement, this capacity is offset by his relation to the body of the house. His degree of latitude (in this case, forward movement) is bounded, literally *and* figuratively, by its limit.

Ultimately, the narrator's quest to quite literally transcend his surroundings does not signify a new beginning—a *something-more* of affect—but rather a shift in the way the bodies of the encounter are configured. Specifically, the intensities of the encounter proceed towards a final indiscernability in which the narrator, formally harried by spectres, becomes himself the spectre. This becoming-spectre takes place in a moment of being looked-at, a look that generates an erasure of his formative "castle-body" and a re-embodiment in which he finally "reach[es] beyond to the other" of memory. The absent moment of self-recognition alluded to earlier in the story now returns to the scene, becoming the pivot for the narrator's transformation. Discovering, to his amazement, the top of the tower "gorgeously ablaze with light," and living beings "making merry, and speaking brightly to one another," the narrator is confronted with the joyful prospect of reclaiming life, the potential for entering into affective relation with the light he sought (47). However, the moment of his looking-towards life and light, the apex of this sensation of hope, is sundered nearly simultaneously, as the gaze is returned to him by the party in a look of horror:

I now stepped through the low window into the brilliantly lighted room, stepping as I did so from my single bright moment of hope to my blackest convulsion of despair and realisation. ... Many covered their eyes with their hands, and plunged blindly and awkwardly in their race to escape (47)

In crossing the final threshold into the newly discovered room, the encounter passes from connection to disconnection, as the outsider is finally denied by the human world of the living. Finding himself in front of a “surface of polished glass” (a mirror, for intents and purposes), he gazes at last on the “source” of the haunting, the embodied phantom which all along haunted the castle and its shadows: *himself*, “the ghoulish shade of decay, antiquity, and desolation; the putrid, dripping eidolon of unwholesome revelation; the awful baring of that which the merciful earth should always hide” (49; 48).

Importantly, accepting one’s reflection here does not signify the acceptance of a solid identity for the narrator, the return of a stable self to the realm of cognition and thought. Rather, the return of the “mirror” to the scene of the tale suggests a highly affective mode of individuation having little to do with subjectivity. Instead of reflecting a person, the mirror reflects the totality of a scene, a tableau of felt intensities in conjunction, taking in the terrified look of both the party and the narrator’s acknowledgement of his own form. It is the horrified gaze, doubled and then tripled by the mirror as the narrator sees both his own face *and* the revulsion of those who behold it, which is frozen in a moment of “unwholesome revelation,” an affective moment par excellence. In this respect, the look and the mirror also become part of the story’s “haecceity”: an individuated composition of elements held momentarily together, but whose moment signifies an eternity independent of its actual duration. Deleuze and Guattari discuss the haecceity in terms which take in the reflection of the individual subject, but exceed it by also taking in the background against which the reflection occurs, the panorama of relations and divisions which always reflect it anew.

“When the face becomes a haecceity,” they argue, “You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects. You have the individuality of a day, a season, a year, a life” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 289). As part of a haecceity then, the narrator’s face stands for more than itself in this scene, but includes also the totality of responses to it, the reactions and their acknowledgement. A mis-en-abyme of affective force relations, the mirror reflects the face, but also as a *memory* of the face, “a single and fleeting avalanche of soul-annihilating memory,” in which the narrator comes to know “in that second all that has been” (49). In other words, the memory of the face corresponds to the eternity, the “all that has been” and will be, of the haecceity in “The Outsider.”

Crucially however, the memory of the face does not lead to any denouement that would exorcise the story of its spectres. The story continues, moves beyond the retrieval of memory to a becoming with memory. The narrator and his memories are conjoined in a single body, resembling what Deleuze and Guattari call the “soul annihilating” compound which shatters “lived perceptions into a sort of cubism, a sort of simultaneism, of harsh or crepuscular light” (*What is Philosophy?* 171). In “The Outsider,” the revelation of memory *is* the spectre. There is no secret or Gothic history that could illuminate the connection between the two, or that could explain how the narrator came to be the ghoul: the reader is told nothing other than that he “remembered beyond the frightful castle and the trees” (49). Rather, memory and the spectral intertwine in an affective feedback loop in the story. Surrounding the narrator, the loop fractures his “lived perceptions” of himself, making him both haunted and haunter, memory and specter, simultaneously.

Discussing the *plane of consistency*—their term for the continuum or “grid” of dimensions on which affects and “multiplicities” circulate in mutual interconnectedness—Deleuze and Guattari claim that the “failure of the plan(e) is part of the plan(e) itself,” an

effect of its infinite expansiveness. “[Y]ou will always find something that comes too late or too early,” they argue, a new becoming which forces “you to recompose all of your relations of speed and slowness, all of your affects, and to rearrange the overall assemblage” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 268). In the case of “The Outsider,” what began as a journey inward, towards memory and truth, becomes an outward flourishing of dark vitality, an opening out into the wider world beyond the castle and its occulted knowledge. The movement of inside to outside is a sign that the scaffolding of memory is no longer required, that becoming and affect “no longer need support” from any master-narrative of recollection. Indeed, the narrator comes to rejoice in this confusion, in what he calls the “balm” of “nepenthe,” a universal forgetfulness that takes over as soon as “the burst of black memory vanished in a chaos of echoing images” (49). This denial of life, light and memory forms the dynamics of a genuinely new affective composition, one which takes the “void” as its centre, and a rejoicing in the “the bitterness of alienage” as its chief intensity (49). It is in truly embracing his status as an outsider, “a stranger in this century and among those who are still men,” that he locates the “propitious moment” of bloom-space, the space where he is no longer the intruded-upon, but the intruder in the “catacombs” of memory itself (49).

Ultimately, the movement of plot in “The Outsider” proceeds in tandem with the movement of affect. The tale’s affective gradations, the points at which bodies stick and adhere, transitioning into further states, governs the plot’s development. The various bodies within the tale—narrator, castle, memory, spectre—are deployed only as moments of becoming, intensities within the story’s larger affective compass, passing and being annihilated at every turn. Hauntologically speaking, the story is also a meditation on the “thing” that gazes at us from the gaps within history and temporality, the revenant whose correspondence to name and essence remains unknown: the very face whose image eludes us.



## Spectral Geographies: Thomas Ligotti's "The Red Tower"

Lovecraft's story is notable for elucidating what could be called a psychogeography of spectral affect. Its narrative is structured around a series of affective encounters, taking in subject and object, terror and nostalgia, and above all, inside and outside. In this way, "The Outsider" circulates around a haecceity of associations, and an individual scene of haunting: the look combined with a being-looked-at.

Written some seventy years later, Ligotti's "The Red Tower" takes this preoccupation with geography, hauntology and affect a step further. Unlike Lovecraft's tale, which retains from its source in the gothic the anthropomorphism of the revenant, "The Red Tower" eschews anything close to a human foundation for its hauntology. Instead, the haunt is part of an affective tableau in which human intensity is non-existent, having long been extinguished from the scene: even the narrator is denuded of humanity, delivering only an anonymous reportage. Specifically, the spaces of old industry, with their decayed and useless machineries, are represented as flickering with a protean, schizoid life—a uniquely spectral energy.

In Ligotti's tale, affect is conveyed as an ambience, a set of environmental conditions which have come to flourish in the absence of humans. The bodies which generate this affect, and are generated by it, are the barely-sentient bodies of late capitalism—its factories, modes of production, and its myriad operative logics. Functioning in the absence of any overseers, such bodies have come to self-administer, generating their own affective field which guides their movements, cycles, and interactions. Their movements belong to an haecceity long since decomposed, but whose residue has survived as a gateway for new mutations. Affect in "The Red Tower" is anonymous, estranged from an origin in any past human life cycle: a voided echo that has taken on a life of its own. Unlike "The Outsider," there is no semblance of memory that could even begin to narrativize becoming, or delimit affect. Instead, the only

rule is a material deformation and decay, and the force relations common to both: affect here exists in colour—the process of one colour being discoloured by another—and in ruination—the slow dilapidation of buildings or their untimely destruction.

Nonetheless, there *is* a centre to the story's plane of consistency, a locus which mediates the various movements and affects, focalising them in different ways. This locus is the conflict between two zones or spaces: the Red Tower itself, and the district in which it is located, "the grey emptiness of its surroundings" (65). What the story illustrates is the violent coupling of these zones marked by divergent intensities. The tower, awash with "red" vitality, and the dead industrial landscape, tinged with an entropic "grey," enact a war of becoming in which red and grey project and impinge upon each the other:

The ruined factory stood three stories high in an otherwise featureless landscape. Although somewhat imposing on its own terms, it occupied only the most unobtrusive place within the gray emptiness of its surroundings, its presence serving as a mere accent upon a desolate horizon. (65)

What emphasises the affectivity of this image is the noun "accent": the story begins with an accenting of desolation, as red deviates from grey. However, just as the Tower represents a transgressive extrusion haunting the flatness of the grey world, the reverse is also true—the Tower is haunted by the greyness surrounding it, the fatherland that sired it and which threatens at every turn to reclaim it. As the narrator states, "the Red Tower was not always that particular color for which it ultimately earned its fame": rather, "the *encrimsoning* of the factory was a betrayal, a breaking-off, for it is my postulation that the ancient structure was in long-forgotten days the same pale hue as the world which encompassed it" (66; original emphasis).

In this way, both the Tower and the landscape colour and discolour each other in a sometimes violent conflict, a war in which it is never quite certain which has the upper hand.

The Tower and landscape each exist only to act upon, and be acted upon by the other, a chafing which generates affect of the most violent kind. Specifically, the Red Tower is punished for its continued existence by certain “fadings,” counter-offensives from the grey world:

the whole of the Red Tower, as the factory was known, had always been subject to fadings at certain times. This phenomenon ... was due to a profound hostility between the noisy and malodorous operations of the factory and the desolate purity of the landscape surrounding it, the conflict occasionally resulting in temporary erasures, or fadings, of the former by the latter. (66)

Ironically, the hostility between Tower and landscape is the very thing which makes their bodies inseparable. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the zone of affectivity implicating the Tower and its ruined world would be a composite of the “clinch,” in which the dynamism of the red and the inertia of the grey embrace in one and the same energy bloc, and “withdrawal,” in which such energies are wedged apart in eternal incompatibility (*What is Philosophy?* 168).

While the intensive conflict between Tower and landscape is fascinating in itself, it is also impossible to ignore its political undercurrents. The tale metaphorises, through affect, the encounter between a late capitalism of unthinking, unceasing productivity, and a post-capitalism of anonymous, silently functional movements and processes. Indeed, the story reads as a kind of post-modern fable, a meditation on the nightmare formations of late capitalism, which utilises affect as a language of response to an unthinkable future. It is in this respect that “The Red Tower” theorises a politics of affect, which demonstrates how ideological codes can take on a life of their own outside of human involvement. In hauntological terms, it is not the hopeful spectres of a possible future for Marxism that permeate Ligotti’s tale, but rather the unproductive ghosts of a system, deserted by its human

supervisors, which has continued to blindly operate its instruments of production. The Tower can be read as the spectral remnant of this older system, a crazed carry-on from an earlier age of industrial production, which struggles on within an entirely post-capitalist order—the grey world and its sterile homogeneity.

In its early stages, the story of red versus grey is suggestive of a Marxist versus capitalist struggle over the sources of production. However, the affective encounters alluded to in Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the *war machine* and the *state apparatus* offers a more illuminating way of reading the central conflict. Discussing how the state utilises the violence of war internally to maintain its sovereignty, Deleuze and Guattari assert that war itself is never entirely contained by the jurisdiction of the state. It always threatens to explode outwards toward change, exteriority and chaotic expansion: “[war] seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus,” they argue, “to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 388-89). War and state are never in complete accord; instead machine and apparatus enact a tug-of-war that lurches between an orderly “distribution between “states”” and a chaotic “irruption of the ephemeral and the power of metamorphosis” (388-89).

In similar fashion, the Red Tower and the grey territory engage in an infinitely decomposing series of affective skirmishes. The smooth, grey uniformity of the territory is suggestive of the state apparatus, moving to subordinate and limit the Tower's war machine, this extrusion or upswell in its landscape. The Tower's machine-like capacity stands for the “discharge of emotion” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 441), or, in the narrator's words, an “unconquerable desire to risk a move toward a tempting defectiveness” (72). The Tower is “defective” only in its contravention of the laws of the grey territory, its “desolate purity” and its “dreary perfection” (72). “*The State has no war machine of its own,*” Deleuze and Guattari claim, “it can only appropriate one,” but “one that will continually cause it problems” (*A*

*Thousand Plateaus* 391; original emphasis). However, the Tower's resistance to the grey territory is also described as being inevitable, a necessary mutation which would have always spiralled beyond the territory's capacity to control. Consequently, Tower and territory are not simply opposed; rather, each requires the presence of the other as an action-reaction circuit, a point of departure from which to augment "fadings" and counter-fadings. While the territory takes great pains to annex the Tower, "to draw it back toward the formless origin of its being" (72), the fact that the Tower exists at all suggests a "concession" has been made by the territory: a "minimal surrender" to *detritorialisation*, or to what the narrator calls "a spontaneous and inexplicable impulse to deviate" (72). In this sense, Tower and territory share an affective minimum in the same way that war machine and state apparatus do. The grey territory's "monumental tedium" forms the perfect affective firmament for an absolute deviation from it, the starting point for "an inexplicable ... impulse *out of nowhere*" and a "minimal surrender" to change (72; original emphasis).

The chief affective weapon wielded by the Tower, in its efforts to metamorphose beyond the territory, is the series of "novelty goods" it produces. The earliest objects possess a "catapulting force" and "velocity" that transcends normal channels of commerce, allowing them to penetrate all corners of the world market (*A Thousand Plateaus* 393):

Where they [the objects] might ultimately pop up was anybody's guess. It might be in the back of a dark closet, buried under a pile of undistinguished junk, where some item of the highest and most extreme novelty would lie for quite some time before it was encountered by sheer accident or misfortune. Conversely, the same invention, or an entirely different one, might be placed on the night-table beside someone's bed for near-immediate discovery. Any delivery point was possible; none was out of the reach of the Red Tower. (69-70)

Evading the self-policing mechanisms of the grey territory's post-capitalist murk, the Tower's network of underground tunnels, reaching to all "delivery points," forms a late

capitalist analogue for the insidiousness of affect. Despite the “desolate purity” of the territory that threatens at every turn to reclaim the Tower, the latter’s production capacity remains in overdrive, prospering in such harsh conditions. It continues to toil away, guerrilla style, perfecting its insane products and its strategies for deploying them. Among the many objects produced by the Tower in the earliest stage of its production are the following:

an ornate music box that, when opened, emitted a brief gurgling or sucking sound in emulation of a death rattle, ... a pocket watch in a gold casing which opened to reveal a curious timepiece whose numerals were represented by tiny quivering insects, [and a] piece of cement ... that left a most intractable stain, greasy and green, on whatever surface it was placed. (68)

Such commodities double as weaponised affects because they possess both vitality and volatility, a changeability of form and function opposed to the immutable greyness of the surrounding territory. The Tower’s status as a war machine lies in its capacity to produce its own machines, its own mobile systems of artillery to protect against the suppression and capture tactics of the territory. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the threat of conquest by the state leads the war machine to assert its transmutative properties to the fullest. In the face of imminent capture, the war machine “displays to the utmost its irreducibility,” the point where it “scatters into thinking, loving, dying, or creating machines that have at their disposal vital or revolutionary powers capable of challenging or conquering the State” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 393). Similarly, the Tower creates its own products as a form of both defence and attack. They form a contingency against capture by the territory certainly, but they also provide the ordnance for a revolution, a counter-offensive against the grey.

As the narrative moves towards its conclusion, the enigma of the Tower’s operations is pushed ever further towards the realm of spectral abstraction. While the grey world further assaults the Tower in its attempts to “draw [it] back toward the formless origin of its being”

(72), the Tower refines its production techniques into a formlessness of its own. Replacing the old run of novelty goods are a series of what the narrator refers to as “birthing graves” (73), which literally give birth to the next wave of commodities—“hyper-organisms” (74). These hyperorganic product-entities are notable for the way they represent a splicing of contradictory affective values: as the narrator observes, “they manifested an intense *vitality* in all aspects of their form and function; on the other hand, and simultaneously, they manifested an ineluctable element of *decay* in these same areas” (74; original emphasis).

The Tower’s hyperorganic phase represents, on a much larger scale, capitalism entering the spectral world, reaching a zone of indiscernibility in which its operations can no longer be mapped or quantified. This means that such operations become the subject of guesswork, speculation, and fearful mythologising. As he considers the peculiarity of the hyperorganisms, what impresses the narrator most is the way their nature is entirely unknown, a product of hearsay:

Although we may reasonably assume that such creations were not to be called beautiful, we cannot know for ourselves the mysteries and mechanisms of, for instance, how these creations moved throughout the hazy luminescence of that underground world; what creaky or spasmic gestures they might have been capable of executing, if any; ... what their bodies might have emitted in the way of fluids and secretions; how they might have responded to the mutilation of their forms for reasons of an experimental or entirely savage nature. (74)

The final image here, of an ineffable will mutilating its creations out of spite or innovation, crystallises the story’s picture of a spectral capitalism. The Tower’s drive toward commoditization reaches a point where its logic is literally unthinkable, and can no longer be mapped according to a discernible pattern. This is a capitalism that has reached a crisis point of irrational dark, a shadow of its former self, but which continues to lurch and stutter, returning like a revenant to the old processes that made it function. In other words, it is a

capitalism that “no longer belongs to knowledge” but continues to behave as if it ought to, the ghost of a dead machine still tied to the corpse of its former life.

At this point, the story begins to lean on different theoretical ideas, as the war machine and state apparatus recede into a less visible, and more spectral conflict. While the human world to which the narrator belongs fails to account for the stirrings of the Tower, the Tower itself is alive to the workings of its oblivious marketplace: it sees us even as we fail to recognise it. Derrida calls the sensation of being looked at by a familiar yet unrecognisable “thing” the “visor effect”: it “looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there” (*Specters of Marx* 6). In this case however, the density of the visor belongs to a revenant of ideology, a discursive order concealed by “degeneracy and death” (76). The degenerate Red Tower, long since having decayed, habitually re-constructs itself into a semblance of its past self, a hyperorganic, spectral imitation of the real. It is the look of this spectral imitation, and the narrator’s apprehension of its glance, that generates an affect of haunting: the visor effect becomes, here, the visor *affect*.

Near the end of the story, as the Tower progresses toward an even more inexplicable “third level” of production, the role of the narrator in the story’s affect-narrative comes fully into view. He reveals himself to be the voice of a generation, caught in the vortex of Derrida’s “end of history,” whose inheritance is to live with the ghosts of an infinitely degenerative capitalism. As he explains, the spectre of capitalism infusing the Red Tower haunts everyone equally: “We are all thinking and talking about the Red Tower in our own degenerate way,” he claims at the end (76). Consequently, the tale depicts the inheritance of haunting as much as haunting’s affect, the potential for such indeterminate legacies to be passed on into the indefinite future.

Ultimately, the Tower is revealed to never have been anything physical—its existence was always purely conceptual, an idea or a virtuality. The Tower’s final phase signals the



absolute disappearance of its form from imagination: “I myself have never seen the Red Tower – no one ever has and no one ever will,” divulges the narrator (76). The existence of this potential new order is sustained only by the rumour-mongering of its inheritors, and the reiteration of such reports from one corner of society to the other. The narrator is himself aware of the dangers of such reportage: “Perhaps it seems that I have said too much about the Red Tower, and perhaps it has sounded too strange,” he admits (76). However, his counter-claim that he is only one voice among many, that he is merely passing on what he has heard about the Tower, hardly relieves him of responsibility. As Derrida argued, any “injunction of memory,” anything that purports to speak about the past, is always bound to “the anticipation of the future to come,” to an inheritance that is repeated indefinitely (*Archive Fever* 79). Living amid the ruins of history, the inheritors of history’s ruin sustain the spectral locus of the Red Tower by speaking about it.

This final point, where the Tower passes beyond the look, reveals the true nature of its affective grammar: that it is borne of a Derridaean wish to “learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation” with ghosts (*Specters of Marx* xviii). Replacing the affect of the look here is the affect of the *word*, the passing on of the haunting through speech and confession. Affect and hauntology meet in “The Red Tower” in the form of a language of response to an aftermath that is never seen, never thought, but only felt in fearful apprehension. The Red Tower, having long passed into ruins, subsists in the shadow of language, an eternal figure that forever retains the potential for being spoken anew. Further, it is the *possibility* of its existence, the fearful speculations of haunted consumers, which becomes the eternalising truth of its threat. Ultimately, there is no end for the Red Tower, no point in which it could “ultimately consummate[e] its tradition of degeneracy” (76). As the narrator suggests in his final confession (“I wait for them to reveal to me the new ventures of the Red Tower as it proceeds into even more corrupt phases of production”), there will

always be a “further on,” some new phase of the Tower waiting to bloom, or a *then* which waits for us forever in some abyss of the future (76).

## Conclusion

What is common to both “The Outsider” and “The Red Tower” is a Barthesian neutrality with respect to how language mediates and generates affect. Each story fixates on a specific affective conjugation, a scene wherein objects and subjects, states and machines, are suspended in a moment of unexpected exchange. Such a becoming is opposed to the binary distribution which typically governs their relation. Moreover, the stories elucidate affective neutrality via a language whose grammar is hauntological in character. In the same way that Derrida’s hauntology is determined by a dialogue without closure, and a promise to look beyond sensible paradigms to the incomprehensible thing that defies “semantics as much as ontology,” weird fiction is committed to finding a language that can express the interstitial, the ephemeral without essence or name (*Specters of Marx* 6).

In “The Outsider,” this language takes the form of a psychogeographics of the haunted self. Its narrative of self-interrogation takes the interiority of subjects and combines it with the pure exteriority of affect. Exploration of the castle symbolically mirrors the narrator’s own attempt at self-discovery, leading to a moment of clarity wherein the twin notions of self and memory are annulled for all time. Here, the cavernous, tomb-like reaches of the protagonist’s lost inner life are inverted, replaced by a living exteriority: the insider-becoming-Outsider. In “The Red Tower,” the affective grammar goes beyond the limits of the individual to places nonpersonal, traversing zones of post-ideological decay in a world left literally to its own devices and perverted machines. The hauntology of “The Red Tower” is one of futural apprehension, where what is past is never truly past but proceeds into the future in forms unexpected, modes of order unforeseen. Despite their depiction of different

hauntologies of affect however, both tales are semiotically committed to retaining a “hyperconsciousness of the affective minimum” (*The Neutral* 101). Through articulating the implicit connections between affect and hauntology, both stories carry on weird fiction’s project “to exempt meaning” from language in a way that can do justice to the inexpressible (*The Neutral* 101).

## **Chapter 6**

# **“Who Knows the End?”: Affect, Threat, and Performativity**

This chapter considers further the performative component of weird affect by looking in detail at one of its primary manifestations: the affect of threat. By threat, I do not mean danger, risk, or hazard in a plot-related sense, but rather the kind of threat first posited by affect-theorist and philosopher Brian Massumi: threat as an intensity of potential, the possibility of worse things to come that haunts nearly every weird tale beyond even the explicitly disastrous events depicted in their climax. In contrast to threat-events that can be named, identified, and avoided, threat *affect* relates to the pure unknown, an abstract danger that can only be discussed in the most vague and prevaricating terms. Despite this inexpressible opacity, threat affect is also accompanied by a conviction that its danger is real, the sense that it is always there, somewhere, waiting to happen in an equally inscrutable future that never appears. Massumi argues that the power of threat increases the more uncertain the future becomes. In other words, threat’s reality strengthens, gains power, whenever the future is fearfully speculated upon or called into doubt:

Self-renewing menace is the future reality of threat. It could not be more real. Its run of futurity contains so much more, potentially, than anything that has already actually happened.

Threat is not real in spite of its nonexistence. It is superlatively real, because of it. (“The Future Birth of the Affective Fact” 53)

According to Massumi, the subject of threat affect *never occurs* as such—its menace keeps jumping forward from horizon to futural horizon, framing the present as it does so. As much as its occurrence is deferred indefinitely however, threat affect’s reality is also never extinguished by any final “event”: the affective nature of threat resides in the way it endures on the edge of perception and temporality, infecting the present, and perceptions of the

present, with a fearful ambience. In other words, in its affective form threat is a near-atmospheric sensation bloc taking in both the actual and the virtual. Insofar as threat affect gestures to an event taking place in actuality, it also always exceeds that event in terms of sensation, and a fear of not knowing what the future will bring. Moreover, while actual threats have a definite duration, a point at which their emergency warning is downgraded, threat affect outlives the eventuation of the threat itself, subsisting in the fears of those affected that worse might be to come.

Consequently, Massumi's concept of threat affect does not, in itself, exist *as* anything—it has “no actual referent” (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 59). Rather, the reality of threat affect is tied to implication rather than explicit reference. Unlike threatening events or subjects, such as natural disasters or human conflicts, threat affect is a reality derived from the possible rather than the actual, and the performative force of utterances rather than their content or meaning: for example, threat affect is more adequately captured in the declaration “a storm is coming” rather than in the actual event of a destructive storm itself. Thus, while threat affect and actual threats are tied together in denoting a catastrophic occurrence, the former exceeds the latter in positing many potentialities of such an occurrence, a surfeit of outcomes whose number and magnitude can never be perceived in advance. The relation between threat affect and actual threats can be read in terms of a narratology of catastrophe, taking in both the real and the imagined, as well as the sensation of anxiety that brings them into close proximity. Massumi's article was written as a prediction of threat becoming one of the dominant affects of our time, a historical moment when the war on terror was in its relative infancy, and the language of fear guiding the crypto-proselytising of western ideologues was still being formalised. Thus, threat affect can be read along the lines of what Deleuze and Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, define as the “Unspecified Enemy” (465). This nameless antagonist is the spectre of fear governing the

geopolitical war machine, the anxiety over the violent usurpation of its power. However, the “Unspecified Enemy” also alludes to the surplus of affective capital produced *by* the war machine, the hazy set of virtual conditions that the State’s engine of war brings into being. This set of conditions is at least partly a matter of ideological discourse, the manner in which the fear-mongering words of politicians “continually recreate unexpected possibilities for counterattack, unforeseen initiatives determining revolutionary, popular, minority, mutant machines” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 465). Threat’s affect posits an Unspecified Enemy behind every corner, a series of potential catastrophes which are “multiform, maneuvering and omnipresent,” visible only in the fearful discourse saturating the public sphere (465).

Ultimately, threat affect is nearly entirely a product of language, of the menacing virtual or potential force inhered in signs. Massumi was the first to recognise the interconnectedness between threat affect and language; specifically, he argued that “*signs*” are a “common category of entities” whose main function is to make “what is not actually present really present nonetheless” (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 63; original emphasis). Ultimately, the “sign-induced becoming” of threat’s “[s]emiosis” answers “the question of how a sign as such dynamically determines a body to come” (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 65). Massumi’s earlier designation, in “The Autonomy of Affect,” of signs as “semantically and semiotically formed progressions” of affect provides a subtly menacing spin on the concept of metonymy (221). Signs are simultaneously the effect *and* the vehicle “for making presently felt the potential force of the objectively absent” (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 63). Moreover, threat’s passage into the real via language grants it a degree of autonomy beyond those who think it and feel it. Existing, as it does, as a demon within declarative speech, threat is able to increase its own affective intensity through its language-beholden human hosts: every time an individual speculates and utters fearfully

about the future or a future catastrophe (*What if there is no tomorrow?*), the affect of threat is heightened, granting it a greater foothold in reality.

### The Performativity of Threat in Weird Fiction

Threat affect forms one of the key modes in the weird's performative arsenal. Weird fiction's interest in threat signifies a shift from threat affect in the world to threat affect in text, and the performative grammars capable of registering threat's barely perceptible moment of crisis. It could be argued that weird fiction's self-theorising approach to language harnesses the threat of an unknown future in a very precise way, one that is perhaps more relevant than ever. China Miéville has persuasively argued that the weird's ontology is born of "the burgeoning sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality" ("Weird Fiction" 513). In this sense, the performativity of threat affect is perlocutionary in J. L. Austin's terms: it "produces certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or the speaker" to such an extent that the performance snowballs beyond its originating act, and the affect is carried forward indefinitely by the consequential fears of the "audience" (101). If weird fiction is, as Miéville also claims, a literature of "crisis-blasted modernity showing its contradictory face," then the threat of impending crisis requires a medium for its "face" to be disclosed, a language distilling an affect ("Quantum Vampire" 128). "Weird fiction's ... oppressive numinous grows" at the point where everyday language unveils the horror lurking below the surface of the reality it works to support ("Weird Fiction" 513). In this sense weird fiction is itself a textualisation of threat affect. Over and above any specific crisis its stories might describe, the weird mode distils a "burgeoning sense" of crisis-in-general. It articulates the creeping anxiety, common to modernity, that our structures of meaning-making—such as language and discourse—might not save us, and may in fact be aligned against us.

Weird fiction tells stories about threat affect in a number of ways, but always through correlating its monsters, entities, and sources of horror with the language in which they are registered. One of the most obvious ways weird tales enact the performativity of threat is, thus, to foreshadow the existence of some future horror that outstrips all others that have been described so far in the narrative. Crucially, the absent futures such tales hint at—what they allow to remain absent from the narrative rather than consent to show or tell outright—often gives rise to their most threatening moment. In other words, the foreshadowed possibility of what *may* happen beyond the narrative frame of such stories—in the unnamed future they hint at—rather than what actually happens within the tale often signals the onset of threat affect’s performativity.

As much as it works as a document of our own threat-afflicted epoch then, Massumi’s article can also be treated as a possible poetics for horror fiction and the weird. Threat affect becomes an entity, a *thing*, at the point where it passes into semiosis, carried by the sign and “sign-induced becoming” (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 65). Via weird fiction’s form of sign-induced becoming, threat gains a body, a name, and a diseased sentience. The monsters of weird fiction are vectors of threat affect, an absent presence whose embodied teratology is formless, and its true nature unknown. In effect, weird fiction’s entities pose an answer to Massumi’s question of “how a sign as such dynamically determines a body to come” (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 65).

In another light, and following on from my earlier conclusions regarding weird hauntology, it could be said that threat is the apotheosis of the spectral, the affect of haunting taken to its absolute point of formlessness. It signifies hauntology reaching its height of abstraction, where the haunt attains so great a level of indeterminacy that it becomes something atmospheric; it is a nameless fear that is breathed and felt rather than seen and heard. Thus, while threat and weird hauntology are both affectively tied to language, they are



quantitatively different in character. The hauntological is tied to the content of language in weird fiction—while the haunt in question might be vague and amorphous, it nonetheless retains meaning and reference. Threat affect, on the contrary, has no reference as such, but is instead tied to language's proleptic *force*—the performative representation of the future in the process of it being uttered.

An example of threat affect's proleptic nature is developed in a story previously discussed: Thomas Ligotti's "The Red Tower." Towards the end of my analysis of the story, I claimed that the Tower, as the spectre of a deranged capitalism, dwells in the fearful speculations of its consumers, a language of questioning which keeps it alive indefinitely. From this, and given that the narrator of the story claims that the Tower itself had never been seen, I concluded that it existed only as a possibility, an affective becoming that attained a reality of sorts through being talked about. Here, I would argue that this is the very kind of "semiosis" as "sign-induced becoming" that Massumi claims is among the primary modes of threat affect's movement. Furthermore, the tale isolates the performativity of threat's affect by devoting its concluding lines to threatening utterances concerning the future. The narrator's ultimate response to the continued threat of the Tower—its progressively "more corrupt phases of production"—amounts to the only human action possible in the face of something as ineffable as the threat of an unknown future. All he can do is listen, listen to the voices that speak of the Tower, wait for their echoes to emerge, strain to hear them while at all times keeping still, and then at last become one with them—a part of their choir of foreshadowing (77). "I must remain quiet for a terrifying moment," he whispers; "*Then* I will hear the news of the factory starting up its operations once more ... *Then* I will be able to speak again" (77; my emphasis). This "terrifying moment," together with the repeated "*Then*," sums up the temporality of threat, the way it contaminates the present with an elusive and unfathomably threatened future. In Ligotti's tale, life lived in the present is always

shadowed by the horror of something worse, a “*Then*” which remains fixed like a tower on the horizon.

The narrator’s words also signify the vehicle of threat affect’s metastasis, the increase of its reality-effect within the story. The Tower and its many dangers are inseparable from the voices, and from the fear which, catalysed in speech, expands threat’s intensive field, projecting its affect ever further into an abyssal futurity. Thus, while the Tower itself may be threat’s costume or mask in this story, it is the possibility that the narrator “will be able to speak again,” at some future point, that reveals the truth of threat affect. Distinct from, yet a part of, any monstrous shape it might take in weird fiction, threat affect chiefly resides in the sensations of fear and doubt as well as the performative utterances which accompany and make such feelings legitimate. Composed neither of concrete, steel, or any other substance, the Tower’s structure is arguably entirely proleptic, a semiotic architecture of rumour and guesswork. Moreover, the story’s success as a fiction is arguably due to its own performative logic, the way it builds up an image of the Tower’s reality before revealing itself as a nightmarish bluff, an imposture played on the reader by an unreliable narrator and his honeyed words. Again, the “sign-induced becoming” of the Tower emblematises its performativity. What the reader of the story is left with, the final terror that remains by the end, is not another, more corrupt image of the Tower itself, but its potential to be made worse by language. The possibility that the Tower could be renewed in and through speech, “making presently felt the potential force of the objectively absent,” ultimately emerges as the apex of the story’s horror (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 63).

In effect, “The Red Tower” deliberately makes plain what in the other stories mentioned above is disguised as a more or less innocent use of rhetoric. What each seems to suggest—and what Ligotti’s tale theorises directly—is that the weird mode is often a narrative exercise in responding to the empty void of the future. By using performative

language to generate threat affect, the weird circulates around the future's epistemological blank, fearfully invoking different shades of its oblivion. As I will argue later, such a reading of the weird makes it possible to interpret its teratological entities, such as Cthulhu, as semiotic avatars for the threatening future—giving present form and body to what is “objectively absent.”

### The Call of the Shadow

Even within Edgar Allan Poe's oeuvre, “Shadow: A Parable” is a remarkable vignette, distilling as it does many of the author's own obsessions with the near-magical, performative powers of words. In his book *The Cryptographic Imagination* (1997), Shawn James Rosenheim argues that Poe's interest in cryptography was ahead of its time in positing something like an affective foundation for communication. Rosenheim asserts that cryptography treats signs in a “thaumaturgic” or alchemical manner, “leading the reader into mysteries of sign, depth, and transformation” (64). Furthermore, he claims that such text-induced alchemies were attractive to Poe due to the latter's “pronounced sense of the apocalypse of signification, in which the opaque materiality of the world reveals its symbolic organization” (89). If Poe's texts are interpreted as expressions of this theorised “apocalypse of signification,” it becomes possible also to interpret them as theorisations of threat affect, condensations of the apocalyptic, though deferred, power of the sign.

While “Shadow: A Parable” does not employ actual cryptographs or mention the science of cryptography within its narrative, it nonetheless utilises something like a cryptographic logic in revealing what could be called the “symbolic organization” of threat. This symbolic organization is tied to the story's function as a parable; like any parable-narrative, “Shadow” works metonymically, performing its message in the telling, or the parabolic arc, of its story. Poe's parable is a seminal moment in the history of weird fiction, signalling the protogenesis of one of threat's primary avatars: shadow. Like threat affect,

shadow is neither here nor there, an enigmatic symbol for an elusive danger. Seemingly signifying the existence of a “thing,” shadow makes it difficult for its perceivers to tell whether the thing in question is close or distant. Either way, the shadow, an illusory projection of material presence, must nonetheless be dealt with on its own terms. It is these “terms” which many weird tales perform, and for which “Shadow: A Parable” provides much of the symbolic groundwork. The universality of the shadow as a cipher for threat is visible in the titles of many weird tales, of which the following examples from the *Weird Tales* circle represent only a handful: Lovecraft’s posthumous “collaborations” with August Derleth, “The Shadow Out of Space” (1957) and “The Shadow in the Attic” (1964), Clark Ashton Smith’s “The Double Shadow” (1933), Frank Belknap Long’s “The Shadow Dwellers” (1945) and “Shadow Over Venus” (1946), and, of course, the most famous examples, Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Out of Time” (1936) and “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936). Poe’s piece, however, contains no Elder Gods or nameless hierophants, the morphological and mythological entities that “shadow” would come to be associated with. Instead, it presents a tableau in which threat, and humankind’s fearful response to the threat affect of shadow, is performed in allegorical relief.

One of the most important, and threat-defining, moments in the story is the opening paragraph. This opening forms a direct address to the implied reader of the story from its narrator, the scholar Oinos. Not only does this address describe the passing of time, it also performs linear time as an integral part of threat’s affective field:

Ye who read are still among the living: but I who write shall have long since gone my way  
into the region of shadows. For indeed strange things shall happen, and secret things be  
known, and many centuries shall pass away, ere these memorials be seen of men. (373)

What is remarkable about Oinos’s address is that it performs several temporalities at once—present (“are”), past (“since”), and future (“shall”)—invoking a relationship in which all three

coalesce in the reading of the manuscript. However, this relationship is not a fair and equal one. The implied “living readers” are made subordinate to this “region of shadows,” an undefined (and indefinable) space and time from which the voice of the narrator-speaker emanates, and which appears to derive from both past and future simultaneously. The reader in the present is performed, or brought into being, by this bifold past-future presence and, as such, can only listen to its injunctions helplessly, as though they were a command.

Thus, the picture of temporality set up by Oinos’s address only appears to correspond to the linear time we think we know: instead, it more closely resembles the ineffable temporal terrain of threat affect. As Massumi argues, threat affect is born of a relationship between past and future, a collusion that affectively threatens its own artificially constructed present—that moment in which past and future are experienced as one. Moreover, this affect, like “Shadow’s” opening address, is cyclical in its implications:

The superlative futurity of unactualized threat feeds forward from the past, in a chicken run to the future past every intervening present. The threat will *have been* for all eternity. (“The Future Birth of the Affective Fact” 53; original emphasis)

While it is oriented towards the future, threat affect requires an imagined past from which to emerge, and from which it can continuously emerge again and again each time it is experienced in the “intervening” period we call the present. As a result, threat’s nature is a mobile, circuitous becoming:

The futurity doesn’t stay in the past where its feeling emerged. It feeds forward through time. It runs an endless loop forward from its point of emergence in the past present, whose future it remains. Threat passes through linear time, but does not belong to it. It belongs to the nonlinear circuit of the always will have been. (“The Future Birth of the Affect Fact” 54)

In the realm of performativity, what could be said to correspond to this “nonlinear circuit” taking in past and future at once, is the memorial, and the promise to the future memorialising the past entails (*I promise to remember*). Frequently, threat memorialises itself in the past in order to project itself into the future, accomplishing this projection via the speech act of the promise. Shoshana Felman has written extensively on how the promise “constitute[s] a [performative] paradox,” a problem whose “very logic [is] a sign of a fundamental contradiction” (3-4). Here, it is worth noting that the performativity of the promise and the performativity of threat affect are governed by a similar kind of “temporal paradox,” one “whose relation to time is particularly perverse” (Felman 32). According to Felman, the promise entails “a subversion of linear time and ... a deconstruction of the before/after dichotomy and of the behind/ahead dichotomy” (31). She continues,

The promise ... is a flight forward, to the extent that it stems from the haste function: between the limit and the end, vanishing point between the end behind and the end ahead, it leaps across the lack of/in the present toward an anticipation of the future, and across the lack of means toward an anticipation of the end. (32)

Like the promise, threat affect transcends the binaries of “before/after” and “behind/ahead” by reaching forward into the future and backward into the past in one and the same moment. Each temporal horizon is framed by the performativity of threat affect, as it moves from past to future in anticipation of an end that never comes, a promise of a threatening object whose arrival is always deferred, thereby infecting the entire time-stream with its affect.

It is this kind of perverse promise that underpins “Shadow’s” performance of threat affect in its opening lines. The “region of shadows,” that place of death from which Oinos projects his address from the distant past, promises and encodes itself into the future it speaks of, into the future tenses of “*shall* happen” and “*be* known,” as well as the “many centuries” that are made by the rhetorical utterance to “pass away” (Poe 373; my emphasis). The

rhetoric of the address is a performance of threat affect insofar as it sets up a relationship of threatening collusion between past (Oinos's time) and future (our time), a temporal conspiracy whose menace is affectively felt in the present—in the moment of our reading the words. As in Lovecraft's tale, Poe's shadow is out of time, but superlatively *of* time as well—a microcosm of threat-time.

Oinos's "manuscript" is performative in more ways than one: it can also be interpreted as an exercise in cryptographically encoding one performative or speech act with another. In such a way, future-oriented, proleptic terms, such as "predict," "foreshadow," and "insinuate," and "warn," are all complicit in a chain of threat performativity, a feedback loop of temporally decayed verbs and adverbs. This nested inter-penetration of performatives is, once again, accomplished through the mode of the parable. As a parable, the story didactically enacts a warning regarding the inevitability of death and decay, and the futility of resisting it. In this sense, the "Shadow" of the title is, literally, the shadow of death, whose valley all human beings traverse. On one level of its narrative then, "Shadow" represents a meditation on death and ending: Oinos recounts a night spent shut in a "noble hall" with seven companions, attending a wake for their young colleague, Zoilus. This symbolic death of innocence is framed here by a more generalised apocalypse or species-Death: the year is described by Oinos as being one of "terror" and "Pestilence," in which the world waits to be visited by a long-predicted and "evil" astrological happening—the conjugation of Jupiter with the rings of Saturn.

However, this surface-play of deaths and predicted finalities cryptographically nests another kind of performance—a secret performance-within-a-performance, which gradually disinters itself from the tale's parabolic structure. This chimerical drama is nothing less than the threat affect accompanying the fear of death or finitude, shadowing it from within the margins of speech. It is telling that a significant portion of the tale fixates on the *vigil* of

death, of Oinos and his colleagues waiting by the side of Zoilus's coffin in various states of revelry ("Yet we laughed and were merry in our proper way—which was hysterical") (374). This vigil-period of waiting, arguably a performative attempt to *kill time*, coupled with the symbolic significance of the coffin or crypt, functions to unlock the doors to the tale's hidden theatre-stage. As Rosenheim has argued, "[c]ryptographic narratives," like Poe's, "perpetually return to this tension between the crypt of writing and the hidden place in which bodies are buried" (46). The buried secret, in this case, is that death is merely a blind, a rhetorical effect of the parable, to conceal and then expose the threat affect that covertly guides the structure of the tale. The parable's warning regarding death is, ultimately, a cryptograph that conceals threat affect within its sign.

In this respect, the scholars' fretful vigil beside the coffin forms an elegant metaphor for the way threat defers itself within an endless present, in this case and endless period of waiting. This is borne out by the black depression which accompanies the vigil, a depression of which Oinos "can render no distinct account" (374), and which seems even to permeate the composition of the hall itself:

Black draperies, likewise, in the gloomy room, shut out from our view the moon, the lurid stars, and the peopleless streets—but the boding and the memory of Evil, they would not be so excluded. There were things around us ... things material and spiritual—heaviness in the atmosphere—a sense of suffocation—anxiety—and, above all, that terrible state of existence which the nervous experience when the senses are keenly living and awake, and meanwhile the powers of thought lie dormant. A dead weight hung upon us. ... all things were depressed, and borne down thereby. (374)

As a tableau, the passage seems less a description than a performance of threat, a combination of signs whose clotted and suffocating idiom enacts threat's own suffocatingly virtual reality. Specifically, the scene freezes the passing of time into an artificial, "dead



weight” present, accompanied by an objectless dread whose only form is ambient—a “heaviness of atmosphere.” Further, the nature of the “nervous” tension here, described as a heightening of sense and a corresponding dulling of thought, is consistent with affect’s protean, interstitial life. Threat affect seems to tincture the environment of the scene, its very rooms and corridors, invoking the manner in which objective, material realities become coloured by threat’s potential. The diegetic world marked out by the tale at this point is just such a “gloomy room,” whose black draperies both conceal and insinuate the nameless threat in question, an affect distilled in the act of a senseless waiting. The finality of death becomes, in this scene, the threat-suffused *waiting-for-death-to-appear*.

One of the ways that Poe’s tale theorises threat is to tie it to both warning and waiting, or to action and reaction. Warnings, the tale suggests, are always vehicles for threat’s nesting serpent. As performatives, warnings are often used to defer hasty action and encourage waiting, as well as an attitude of wariness and caution in those who wait. On its own however, without some added coda or qualification, a warning is just as likely to increase worry and panic, and to increase as a result the felt reality of threat affect in waiting’s elongated present. In other words, threat affect in Poe’s story accompanies the warning performative to the extent that the warning itself lacks an object, performing only itself without any supplementary description that might direct the force of its utterance. Warnings are dangerous in this sense; they require such supplements in order to be performatively successful, or to avoid being misconstrued as predictions of unavoidable disaster.

The point where the warning performative fails in its intention, worry and panic becoming an unintentional uptake of the warning, is where threat affect emerges, hijacking the performance. Indeed, “Shadow: A Parable” speculates on the way threat is carried on the tide of an objectless panic—a dreadful *waiting for something to happen*—with Oinos describing a malign “spirit of the skies” alighting in “the souls, imaginations, and meditations

of mankind” (374). Whether or not this spirit’s possession of human dialogue is the result of a failed warning is irrelevant, since the uptake remains the same—Oinos’s insistence that the threat of apocalypse is tied not only to “the physical orb of the earth,” but also to human imagination, makes threat ever more formless and slippery. In Poe’s tale, trouble and threat do not extinguish human life in a fiery conflagration; rather, they pass into the affective realm, entering reality as a slow-burning accumulation of rumour—an accretion of threatening possibilities. The shadow of threat, in other words, renews itself in language’s own “region of shadows.”

The performance and renewal of threat via language is crystallised in the tale’s climactic scene: the encounter between Oinos and his friends and the direct manifestation of the shadow itself. While such a climax might initially suggest an end for threat, a point in which the affect could culminate and thus be extinguished, the hyperbolic negatives used to describe the shadow suggest a different interpretation:

there came forth a dark and undefined shadow—a shadow such as the moon, when low in heaven, might fashion from the figure of a man: but it was the shadow neither of man, nor of God, nor of any familiar thing. ... the shadow was vague, and formless, and indefinite, and was the shadow neither of man nor God—neither God of Greece, nor God of Chaldaea, nor any Egyptian God. (375)

Like threat affect, the shadow described here is both something and nothing, “formless” yet also a composite of forms and possibilities that refuse any final outline. Also like threat, the shadow, even when it appears, remains an enigma—not one thing nor the other, it belongs to the neither/nor of possibility.

However, there is at least one form, the story infers, that can be taken as the shadow’s primary appearance. That form is the human silhouette, the lower-case shadow performed, or “fashioned” as the story says, by the light. In its very formlessness, the shadow reflects the

embodied-yet-mutable formlessness of human life, revealing it to be little more than shadow-puppetry illumined by threat's own infernal light. Tellingly, the shadow arrives in the midst of a contrived celebration, a performance via which Oinos and his fellows attempt to drown out the despondency of death with song and fellowship. Shadow's *interruption* of this human masquerade is reflective of the way threat interrupts the routine of life with its *what if?*: trampling roughshod over all our other performances, social and implied, it comes upon us even when we attempt to ignore it. Threat is the shadow that we cannot escape (like our own shadow) as much as it is the repressed knowledge that this shadow exists, somewhere, even if the light fails to show it. Such awful knowledge is repressed of course, available only to those who have, like the dead Zoilus, moved beyond threat's horizon ("he bore no portion in our mirth, save that his countenance ... seemed to take such interest in our merriment as the dead may haply take in the merriment of those who are about to die") (375).

The story's coda returns like an ouroboros to the memorial of the beginning, though it renders it differently, theorising threat according to a logic of call and response. Oinos hails the shadow, requesting from it "its dwelling and its appellation" (375); in other words, he seeks to procure some proper name which could memorialise the shadow, symbolically re-interring it inside meaning like the sign of an epitaph. However, the shadow's *answer*—"I am SHADOW, and my dwelling is near to the Catacombs of Ptolemais, and hard by those dim plains of Elusion which border upon the foul Charonian canal" (375)—is a mockery of the question in more ways than one. Firstly, in a way similar to the past-present-future concatenation in Oinos's earlier memorial address, the shadow's titling of itself emphasises in-between-ness. It avoids specificity as to its dwelling ("near to"), admitting only its preference for the gaps between places ("Ptolemais," "Elusion," "Charonian canal"). The idea that the shadow's source is located at some nameless point between the places and names we know ("not in the spaces we know, but between them") parallels the way threat's "home"

could be said to be nowhere and everywhere at once, made up of a succession of relationships between things, times, and places.

Secondly, and more performatively, the shadow's answer represents an annulling of the question's intended force: through being deliberately misleading with its answer, the shadow reveals that the question itself was misguided from the beginning. Specifically, it reveals that Oinos's question, like any question asked of or regarding threat (*What is it? Where does it come from?*) is always performative of the very thing it questions, calling it into reality like an offering. This moment in the story, in which question and answer blur together in a single performance, arguably elucidates threat affect's "operative logic," what Massumi argues endows threat with "powers of self-causation" ("The Future Birth of the Affective Birth" 62). Threat gets hailed into existence by those who it will come to victimise, while also, through an interpellative matrix which effectively doubles the force of the hail, bringing those same victims into existence with their own hail-utterance. In other words, those who, like Oinos, hail threat also hail themselves into being as threat's subjects. As a speech act then, the hailing of threat works on threat's own terms, creating a reality and a host of subjects in advance of itself.

Thus, the tale demonstrates how even speech acts which seem performatively secure can conceal shadows, becoming elusive in their function and purpose. While the shadow invokes a tapestry of Biblical and Greek myth in its answer—allowing for the story to be read as a straightforwardly symbolic meditation on Psalm 23's Valley of the Shadow of Death—its words can also be interpreted in a more deliberately misleading light. Specifically, the "dim plains of Elusion" can be read as an "elusive" *plane* in which certainties disappear, leaving only their traces and shadows behind. In this way, threat eludes, evades, it flees toward the future, but it also waits; limning the edges of some future present, it hides there

until humans call it forth again with those question—*who are you?* and *from where do you hail?*

## Cthulhu as Parable

One feature of threat affect I have already discussed is that it lacks any object or referent—in order to be affectively felt, the threat as object or event must remain absent from the scene, withholding itself by remaining fixed on the horizon of a future yet to come. However, this absence also guarantees a radically immanent kind of presence, a virtuality of form which maintains threat as possibility. Threat affect, like Felman’s promise, “consists in the production of an expectation,”—the expectation of a threatening event or object—in which “the very disappointment of this expectation only perpetuates it” (33). Threat affect’s “entire drama is made of a signifying chain of promises which engender each other reciprocally, and whose connecting principle is their own failure to be kept.” (33) Threat affect, above all, orients us to something which could potentially—*maybe*—occur under the right conditions, or “when the stars are right.”

Like “Shadow: A Parable,” “The Call of Cthulhu” could be said to speculate on the formless anonymity of threat. However, Lovecraft’s story is, if anything, more enigmatic than Poe’s in that there is no direct manifestation of any shadow, no illuminating encounter that could even begin to provide a clue as to what the threat in question—Cthulhu—might actually portend. Rather, “The Call of Cthulhu” represents threat affect in terms of a Marco Polo game of present absences and absent presences. The proper name “Cthulhu” drifts chimerically in and out of the mesh of narratives constructed by Francis Thurston, appearing one minute before vanishing again like a shadow out of text. Unlike Poe’s shadowy avatar, Cthulhu is never hailed by Thurston in the present: all that the Arkham gentleman discovers about the threat is past anecdote, a retrospective mill of rumour divested of all objectivity.

And yet, Cthulhu *is* present in the story—he makes his presence felt affectively, as a night sweat, or, as the story puts it, a series of “thoughts that spread fear to the dreams of the sensitive” over “cycles incalculable” (165). Above all, Cthulhu is present as historical residue, a trail of past presences that are repeated again, like threat, every intervening present when they are rediscovered by what Thurston calls “the accidental piecing together of dissociated knowledge” (139). Like “Shadow,” “The Call of Cthulhu” is a parable of threat affect. Specifically, Lovecraft’s story is parable-like in that it can be read as a form of meta-storytelling, or telling stories about stories. Stories that can be dismissed on their own, like the sailor Johansen’s account of Cthulhu’s island emergence, or the dream-record of the artist Wilcox, soon add up, laying out patterns of coincidence and suggesting ominous conclusions: if disastrous things happened before, they could happen again. As affect, threat seeps through the gaps between these stories, linking them together in a chain of dread signification. Thurston’s journey from blissful ignorance to awful knowledge is a result of becoming mired in such gaps, or, to paraphrase his words at the beginning of the story, “correlating” their “contents.” Nesting in these gaps between narratives, “Cthulhu” (the name, as opposed to the actual entity) becomes, like the shadow, a cryptogram for threat’s “sign-induced becoming.”

This indetermination makes Cthulhu a cipher for threat affect. As Massumi claims, threat’s non-reference allows it to exist as infinite potential, a fear of what-comes-next, which, through being cast into the future, circles back around on itself to irradiate the present with a foreboding ambience. Similarly, Cthulhu’s lack of embodied reference, as well as his failure to actually appear in Thurston’s narrative, is an indicator of his threat-potential, not a contradiction of it. The reality of Cthulhu is eternal, precisely because the threat is never actualised: we can never know what form it will ultimately take. According to Massumi, threat’s lack of actual existence is the (negative) source of its power:

It [threat] is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over. We can never be done with it. Even if a clear and present danger materializes in the present, it is still not over. ... There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger. (“The Future Birth of the Affective Fact” 53)

Unshackled from any origin in particular, Cthulhu becomes an “unconsummated surplus” of threat-potential that is always in the process of foreshadowing itself—a deferred apocalypse that can never be avoided or escaped. As Massumi goes on to argue, the “future of the threat is not falsified”; rather, “[i]t is deferred” in a way that makes it timeless (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 54). Timelessness, combined with the lag of deferral, is rendered performatively in the “Call” of the story’s title, an incantation used repeatedly by Cthulhu cultists: “*Cthulhu ftagh*.” Intriguingly, and perhaps without obvious intention on Lovecraft’s part, the alien and guttural-sounding “ftagn” shares a phonetic (if not etymological) equivalence with the German verb *vertagen*, meaning “delay” and even in some cases “deferral” itself.

The deferral inscribed in Cthulhu’s call is echoed in the tale’s concluding lines. A panicked soliloquy from Thurston, the final paragraph utilises a series of lateral speech acts to fearfully hint at the possibility of Cthulhu’s continued existence—a survival which shadows the future with doubt:

Who knows the end? What has risen may sink, and what sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men. A time will come—  
—but I must and cannot think! Let me pray that, if I do not survive this manuscript, my executors may put caution before audacity and see that it meets no other eye. (“The Call of Cthulhu” 169)

Thurston’s final words register a double movement in speech, a performative gesture which captures the upshot of threat for human cognition. The opening “question” represents a

rhetorical *yield*, an “I surrender to the future” which is all the more tragic through being performed in writing. As a posthumous message delivered into an uncertain future, and thus projected towards the threat’s limitless dangers, the possibility remains that Thurston is speaking to no one, performing his impotence in a vacuum.

Further, through being phrased as a question, Thurston’s utterance gains greater performative range: the question, because it is asked of no one in particular, is asked of everyone in general. Given that the “who” is at all times rhetorical, referring to no one alive in the present, the question is self-answering, or rather self-postponing, performative of its own deferral. “Who knows the end?” is literally a deferral to the future possibility of threat affect, an acknowledgment of human impotence in the face of it indeed, but also an expansion of its potential—a leaving the door open for more to come. The possibility remains that the question *might* be answered, that the “who” could attain reference somewhere, somehow, sometime in the future—and this is enough: threat carries on, Cthulhu endures. Thurston’s “end,” or rather the possibility of an ending, enters the realm of speech and is therein multiplied, returning to the present as a swarming virtuality. Thus, the threat of Cthulhu’s return is imminent, but also, spectacularly *immanent*. Formerly one, his exposure to speech and language causes him to spawn into “who knows”-how-many, a series of possibles blotting out the horizon of the future.

The rest of the quotation is, in many ways, a struggling with the aftermath of the opening question’s uptake. It begins with an attempted retraction of the earlier surrender to the threat, a too-late endeavour to outflank the question’s passive despair with some sort of action. This action takes place within the utterance itself, and involves wresting back control of language with more language, resituating the unknown of threat within a more stable symbolic code. “What has risen may sink, and what sunk may rise,” is less a surrender than a belated recovery, an almost carefree (*see if I care*) attempt to annul the threat by resituating it



within an axiom: in other words, a performance of the comforting tautology *whatever will be will be*. This same movement—from passive capitulation to active perseverance—is repeated again in the final sentences of the passage. Once more, Thurston rhetorically gives up the ghost: “A time will come” reiterates the question’s performance of deferral by making the auxiliary verb “will” performatively ambiguous. Since it is left un-italicised in the text, the reader is never sure if it is meant emphatically, as in ‘a time is *sure* to come,’ or, as seems more likely given the uncertainty of things, expectantly—*a time might possibly come*, or even, *a time will come—won’t it?*

However, once again the slip into threat’s language of possibles is covered up, played out of the performance by imperative obligation (“I must and cannot think!”) and prayer (“Let me pray...”). Most crucial here is the gravity underscoring Thurston’s refusal of the rational—“I must” and “cannot”—as the surest form of defence against Cthulhu’s “end” and “time.” Implicit in these imperative auxiliary verbs is the realisation that knowledge, thought, and feeling have become the enemies—while the affect of threat precedes them, they alone disseminate and multiply its dangers. Thurston’s subsequent self-admonishment (“I must and cannot think”) is, arguably, a result of his unspoken terror that Cthulhu could mutate into something worse, that the threat could metastasize as a result of simply thinking about it. The story’s opening declaration—that the “inability of the mind to correlate all its contents” is a “merciful thing”—seems especially important in this context, implying that human thought itself may be ground zero for threat (139). Even when it fails in its attempt to define threat’s “clear and present dangers,” human thought never gives in; it continues mercilessly to probe and question, to think up new potential disasters and events, each more terrifying than the next. Threat is inescapable, in other words, because, once felt, we can never avoid thinking about it.

Ultimately, “The Call of Cthulhu” depicts threat as exceeding the limits of narrative length altogether. Thurston’s confession stops short, unresolved, the only “end” a minor one: his own. By its conclusion, even the structure of the story has come to mirror the nonlinear shuttling of threat, from past to future and back again to the present. After trailing off into the unknown future (“Let me pray that ... it meets no other eye”), the narrative devours its own tale, gesturing yet again to the past present in which it was “Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston” (139), thus resuming threat’s cycle anew.

*“This is Where I Stand”*: Learning to Live with Threat in Caitlin R. Kiernan’s “Andromeda Among the Stones”

My examination of threat affect in weird fiction has emphasised threat as something both *omnipotent* and *omnipresent*. That is, threat’s lack of any object grants it the boon of formlessness, allowing it to exist as pure possibility and potentiality. Moreover, through being tied to the future—itself a virtual horizon of possibility—threat affect is always in the process of being felt, a product of the fear that seems to precede its arrival of its object. Undoubtedly, the object of threat can at least partially be perceived through language, in the speech acts that perform its affect. However, as my analysis of the stories so far has demonstrated, this performativity gives threat its primary weapon, which is objectless; language, and performative language particularly, is the chief mode for the dissemination of threat’s affect, the “sign-induced becoming” that allows it to become a lived reality for its human characters.

As a result of these factors, threat affect appears omnipotent in its reach and influence. Combining a mastery of form, time, and language, threat affect becomes seemingly indefatigable, possessing, as Massumi argues, a “will-to-power,” and a near-total monopoly on the field of human action (“The Future Birth of the Affective Birth” 23). In this respect,

what weird tales like “Shadow: A Parable” and “The Call of Cthulhu” have in common is the way their avatars for threat seems to direct the movements and script the utterances of characters in advance. Hemmed in from all sides, the character can only mouth vague words of refusal or resistance (Thurston’s self-stultifying “I must and cannot speak”), little knowing they are still under the auspices of threat’s malign puppeteer.

Weird fiction depicts all human action as pointless, a series of futile attempts to ward off the inevitable. For the characters who eke out their meagre existence in the shadow of such omnipresent dreads, life itself appears an undesirable thing. Better not to live at all, the narratives and narrators of such stories seem to suggest, than to be cast against one’s will in threat’s ineffable affective drama: as Thurston says, near the end of his tale, “Death would be a boon if only it could blot out the memories” of what has already occurred and what will, potentially, come to pass (169). In affective terms, such statements can be read in terms of a suicidal Deleuzian *clinch*, an intensive impingement of bodies in which the human part of the assemblage surrenders its own becoming (the “if only” of the utterance) to threat. In this way, threat affect reduces human life to either an ongoing pained sensitivity or passive capitulation.

However, weird fiction does occasionally theorise alternatives to this capitulation to threat affect. In stories such as Fritz Leiber’s “The Terror from the Depths” (1976), T. E. D. Klein’s “Black Man With the Horn” (1980), and Caitlin R. Kiernan’s “Andromeda Among the Stones,” there is something like a micropolitics of quiet resistance to threat affect, an attitude which seems to speak for itself rather than simply reaffirming threat’s control over the narrative. This resistance often comes about through performativity, specifically through moments in speech where the protagonist, or main victim of threat in the story, reflects on their dire situation in a way that is out of sync with threat’s affective blooming. In “The Black Man with the Horn,” this is achieved through an irony that is both tragicomic and

metatextual: the protagonist, the real-life member of the Lovecraft Circle, Frank Belknap Long, reflects on becoming a character in his own weird tale. Here, frustration overcodes fear, playing threat out of the scene by making it a subject of irony, an affect allowing Long to grudgingly accept his status as the butt of some cosmic joke. In “The Terror from the Depths,” suspension of threat affect is achieved momentarily through pathos, and specifically in the way the tale captures the spirit of a bildungsroman. Midway through the tale, Georg Reuter Fischer is confronted with the realisation that threat affect is and always has been a product of human action, and a reality that is built, tragically, on familial love and devotion. His dead father’s last message to him (“It is not black down there, my son, as one would think. There are glorious colors. Water is blue, metals bright red and yellow, rock green and brown .... Under the greatest oceans, earth is a rainbow web and Nature is a spider spinning and walking it”) more or less confirms that Georg’s destiny is tied to the threat of Lovecraftian Deep Ones rising from beneath the sea (268). While the story is tragic in its implication that threat is a consequence of Georg’s father’s love for him, the pathos of this moment forms an affective tableau that is temporarily allowed to stand on its own in the story.

Thus, while threat is never defeated in either of these stories (such human triumphalism being antithetical to the weird mode), it is in a way *owned* by its human victims, appropriated as a signifier for their humanity rather than being allowed to negate it. In as much as weird fiction dramatises threat affect through language then, it also may also theorise counter-performances to threat, vocalisations of resistance which allow threatened characters to speak of their suffering, to become with it, and to be temporarily delivered from it.

One of the most poignant yet visceral depictions of resistance to threat affect in weird fiction is the third and final instalment in Caitlin R. Kiernan’s *Dandridge Cycle*, “Andromeda

Among the Stones.” This cycle could be described as Kiernan’s threat-trilogy; the other stories in the cycle, “A Redress for Andromeda” (2000) and “Nor the Demons Down Under the Sea” (2002), all deal with characters who, by accident or design, come into knowledge of a great and all-pervasive threat: once again, the rising of the Deep Ones, Lovecraftian “demons down under the sea,” whose arrival can only ever be temporarily averted. Exposure to this threat does not precipitate any encounter with it. As with “The Call of Cthulhu,” the trial for the protagonists in the two earlier stories is to re-live and come to terms with threat affect’s past history in the present. The characters re-experience in different ways the tragic history of an old house on the New England coastline, the previous focal point of the threat in question. They learn of the house’s previous owner, Machen Dandridge, an occultist and self-proclaimed guardian of the gateway between the surface world and the world beneath the sea. They learn, too, of how Dandridge sacrificed his wife and daughter in the cause of averting the rise of the Deep Ones. Through being forced to enter the derelict house, the protagonists in “A Redress for Andromeda” and “Nor the Demons Down Under the Sea,” both of them female, are exposed to its memory, and are forced into re-enacting the role of the sacrifice in Dandridge’s posthumous narrative of threat.

However, what this restaging of past history leads to in each case is not the implacable recycling of threat affect that we get in “The Call of Cthulhu.” Instead, what is restored is the human voice, and specifically the female voice, in threat’s equation—the women who sacrificed their becoming to the forestalling of threat in the past are allowed to speak again, and to be heard. Performatively, this resistance to threat affect’s reality takes the form of a periperformative gesture along the lines of what Sedgwick describes as that “fascinating and powerful class of negative performatives—disavowal, demur, renunciation, deprecation, repudiation, “count me out,” giving the lie,” etc. (70). Above all, it dramatises the speaking threat-sufferer’s struggle “[to] disinterpellate from [the] performative scene” of

threat, and to refuse threat's "presumptive relations" of authority over them, thereby reinscribing those relations (70). In each story in the *Dandridge Cycle*, the elided present of threat is allowed to speak, to be memorialised in a just and proper way. In encountering the shadow of this particular threat from the past, both women in the present are given the tools to resolve a personal conflict—in "Nor the Demons Down Under the Sea" the protagonist consolidates her relationship with her younger lover and student, while in "A Redress..." the previously dissolute main character finds her place in the world by joining the cult devoted to keeping the Deep Ones at bay. In each case, the overcoming of threat is figured in the way its reality is challenged *and* accepted. What is challenged here is threat's affective tenor, a challenge which involves recoding threat to include other intensities, and allowing fear to co-exist with strength.

"Andromeda Among the Stones" is functionally a prequel to these stories, in that it tells the origin of the Dandridge family's plight from the perspective of Machen's young daughter, Meredith. However, the narrative also represents a centrepiece to the cycle, an ur-text to which the other narratives pay indirect homage. Indeed, the story is similar to Poe's "Shadow: A Parable" in that it contains many monuments and memorials. It forms a paean to the way in which human beings choose to remember each other, the many ways memory is inscribed into objects or places, and how these inscriptions are threatened by death, forgetting, or injustice. Furthermore, Kiernan's prequel offers a defiantly feminist rejoinder to the gender imbalance of much early weird fiction. In stories by Lovecraft and others, responses to the weird's negative theology are often couched in heteronormative rhetoric, wherein the male protagonist writes himself in as the privileged witness to the horror of his narrative, thereby occluding any alternative response that could do justice to threat affect's human stakes. The absence of female voices in the early weird becomes, for Kiernan, a locus

for the emergence of a narrative alterity, a re-writing of the previous imbalance through making female responses to threat affect more authentic than male ones.

The extent to which threat affect and memorial are intertwined is made clear in the story's opening scene, in which Meredith and her father stand by the grave of her mother, arguing over the appropriateness of the burial. Meredith takes issue with her mother's interment in the earth: "Why did you not give her to the sea?" she asked. "She always wanted to go down to the sea at the end. She often told me so" (1). Machen counters this by saying "I've given her back to the earth instead" (1). Beyond the issue of a proper gravesite, what is being contested here is the tenor of the relationship between memorial and threat. Throughout this scene, and indeed throughout the whole story, memorial and threat are the main affective vectors in a highly charged bloc of sensation. This bloc relates directly to time, and to the variant ways past-present-future can be thought or felt; its dominant affect is either the fear of a future oriented threat-time, or the *lest we forget* of a memorial time, which is oriented toward the past and to remembrance. Each of these affects, threat and memorial, correspond to a latitude and a longitude, a series of transformational axes which modify and affect the other, "augmenting or diminishing its power to act" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 283).

As a result, the conflict in "Andromeda Among the Stones" is over narrative: it relates a struggle over how to tell the story of human time, how to make sense of it with an affective language of response—in other words, by threat or by memorial. Each of these "narrativizable action-reaction circuits" of affect cluster around the figure of Meredith's mother, embracing or distending from each other depending on how she is recollected ("The Autonomy of Affect" 221). For Machen, burying his wife's body rather than returning it to the sea, where the object of threat resides, signifies a way of writing the story of her death independently of threat's narrative—in other words, compartmentalising each aspect of time's movement from the other, distributing memorial-time and threat-time in such a way

that they don't overlap. For Meredith on the other hand, remembering her mother is all about accepting threat's reality, understanding the relational inter-connectedness of past and future, and that the narratives of threat and memory are concomitant rather than separate. Importantly, while Machen fixates on the isolation of past and future, Meredith privileges the *now*, emphasising her mother's speech ("she often told me so") as a mark of just memorial in the present.

Above all, the scene frames the dilemma of threat ethically, as a problem of remembrance—how should one give proper memorial to the dead, those victims of threat's emergence in the past present, and whose memory can either accompany threat affect's passage into the unknown future, or be forgotten? For both Meredith and Machen, learning to live with the threat of the Deep Ones is inseparable from the memory of those who have been sacrificed in the name of deferring the threat—those who, like Meredith's mother, have died so that the Deep Ones' rise could be halted. What is at issue here for each character is *how* such deaths are commemorated—as a form of *clinch*-becoming with threat, or as a withdrawal away from it in an attempt to negate it. Even the title of the story echoes this dilemma—the image of Andromeda, the sacrificial virgin, surrounded by potential (head)stones, possible ways of being remembered.

In its mapping of the interplay between threat affect and memory, Kiernan's story exemplifies what Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, called "a heterodidactics of life and death" (xviii). For Derrida, learning to live entails a commitment to something like the threat, or possibility, of death; not only one's own death, but all others as well:

This is, therefore, a strange commitment, both impossible and necessary, for a living being supposed to be alive: 'I would like to learn to live.' It has no sense and cannot be just unless it comes to terms with death. Mine as (well as) that of the other. Between life and death, then, this is indeed the place of a sententious injunction that always feigns to speak like the just.

(*Specters of Marx* xviii)



In learning to live, Derrida's "living beings" commit themselves to acknowledging that life is always shadowed by death, and the indeterminacy of non-existence. In other words, *life reveals itself as irreducible threat* in that it, too, tends toward a limit, a point of indetermination which is death. Justice, for Derrida, arrives at this moment of revelation, in which life, death, past, and future, come together when the linear progression from one to the other is temporarily suspended. This moment could be described as being fundamentally affective, a time of bifurcating intensity. It is within this disjointed present, *between* life and death, that learning to live actually takes place. When the potential of life unfolds into its seeming opposite, threat too can coalesce with safety and refuge.

Crucially, for Meredith Dandridge, this present is also the immediate present of speech, the already-past present moment of "she often told me so" in which her mother spoke for herself, which must be preserved as a living memorial. In choosing to remember the way threat defined her mother's orientation to life, Meredith acknowledges threat affect's pedagogical value—the fact that it can teach us about life, and the possible choices we have in response to it. In this way, resistance to threat involves clearing a space for human speech, and choice, in the moment of threat affect, the only point where it is vulnerable to human intervention. "Told me so" implies that resistance to threat lies in the telling, in the passing on of a voice or an "I," as well as the listening such dialogue entails. Further, it stands for a dialogue that is radically present in the story—it is a dialogue that perseveres, surviving in the memory and action of its inheritor, Meredith. Visiting her daughter as a ghost later in the story, Meredith's mother declares, "I crossed the threshold" to the other world "of my *own* accord" (5; original emphasis). The declarative force of Meredith's mother's "I" here, though it is framed in the past tense ("stood"), shatters the linear perceptions of the lived: as with Derrida's speaking ghost, it is a spectral "I" that "dis-adjust[s] the identity to itself of the living present" (*Specters of Marx* xx). As an assertion of self, it locates that point in the past

present—that point at which, according to Massumi, threat itself emerges—where the human being can declare forcefully, and for all time, *I stood against threat*.

This “I” has performative resonance throughout Kiernan’s story; it becomes a repeated motif whose declarative function, and relation to threat, changes depending on who speaks it. Thus, the “I” becomes a contested voice within the text, a mantle of subjectivity which can be used for good or ill according to how threat is understood. One of the ways the story covers new ground then is that it theorises threat affect as having the potential to be *misunderstood*. Specifically, it explores the way threat can be construed not as affect but as *discourse*, and further, a discourse which can be abused by those who claim to be its authorities.

Machen Dandridge is just such an irresponsible authority. His character brings to mind Derrida’s warning that justice can be co-opted by an autocratic authority figure, an all-father who consolidates his authority over life by “feign[ing] to speak for the dead.” Machen is the prototypical “archon” of threat, both the creator and the interpreter of its law, and the self-appointed speaker for those who are its victims. He alone claims to have knowledge of threat’s cycles, and positions himself as the only one capable of interpreting the signs that signal the rising of the Deep Ones. For Machen, threat relates not to an affect but an *artefact*; a thing to be studied and possessed. Further, his possession of this threat-as-artefact is made legitimate by his ownership of certain sigils of office, phallogocentric substitutes for the threat itself. He is the owner of the house which contains the gateway to the other world, possessing the *key* to its threshold (“*This is where I stand, at the bottom gate, and I hold the key to the abyss*”) (2; original emphasis). Speaking of archons, Derrida notes that their “right to make or represent the law” was at least partially secured by their ownership of the structure in which the documents of the law were kept, “in that *place* which is their house (private house, family home, or employer’s house)” (*Archive Fever* 2). Machen’s “right” to translate

threat into law, and thus also to speak for the dead, is enabled too by his possession of “the book,” a document of prophecy which only he is allowed to look upon. “*I* was given the book,” he proclaims when his authority is momentarily challenged by Meredith early in the story, “I was shown the way to this place. They entrusted the gate to me, child” (11; original emphasis). And again, when his translations are disputed by his son Avery, his defence is to invoke his possession of the lore: “I have the texts, Avery, and the egis of the seven, and all the old ways” (12).

As can be seen here, Machen uses the “I” frequently, but crucially it is an “I” that presumes to speak for everyone, as if responding to threat was the result of an order and not an individual choice. The net effect of these I-utterances is that Machen uses threat affect to dominate others, displacing responsibility onto those who challenge him—such challenges to his law are translated as crimes against the world at large, as well as the order of the home. In this way, threat is appropriated as a circular discourse of entitlement by the Dandridge patriarch, a scripted series of “sententious injunctions” intended to grant him alone the right to speak, to judge, and to remember.

Machen’s reduction of threat to a discourse of “blind pride” (24) is shown to have severe ramifications in the world of the story. His failure to see threat as anything other than a static and unchanging unity, to acknowledge that it always has the affective potential to change into something other than what we expect, leads him to misinterpret its signs. Ignoring the advice of Avery—whose seer-like powers of prescience, together with the fact that his warnings go unheeded, make him the Cassandra to Meredith’s Andromeda in the story—Machen fails to predict the First World War, while also failing to see how this event fits within threat’s cycle (as one of the moments foreshadowing the rise of the Deep Ones). Not only is Machen a false oracle; he is also revealed to be a poor speaker for the dead, susceptible to both cynicism (“*Every one of us is damned ... Every one of us, from the bloody*

*start of time.*”) (12; original emphasis), and, by the end of the story, forgetfulness (“He left lines of salt and drew elaborate runes, the meanings of which he’d long since forgotten”) (25).

Consequently, for Meredith, resisting threat also becomes about resisting her father and his many misunderstandings. This is ultimately accomplished through speech, and through an injunction that refuses sententiousness, recognising as it does the true affective and open-ended nature of threat. Standing on the threshold between worlds, like Andromeda chained to the rocks of Aethiopia, Meredith uses her father’s previous words (“This is where I stand”) (2) against him, finding in them both an admonishment (“she cursed him for the last time ever”) (23-24) and an affirmation:

“‘This is where I stand,’ she said ... ‘At the bottom gate, and I hold the key to the abyss.’ ...  
“The ebony key to the first day and the last, the key to the moment when the stars wink out one by one and the sea heaves its rotting belly at the empty, sagging sky. The blazing key that even angels fear to keep.” (25)

Meredith’s statement “This is where I stand” changes both the ontology and epistemology of threat. It symbolically reclaims the ephemeral present as a time for human speech, a time carved out of threat’s temporal trail in which the *here and now* of the present is owned by the speaker. Via the ritual of these arcane words, human victims of threat’s affect are able to take back the “key” to its moment, gilding it with their own narratives of suffering and survival. Here, threat’s ontology and epistemology are tied to the endurance of the human in the face of threat, as much as they remain tied to threat’s own fortitude.

Meredith’s injunction also represents a continuation of her dialogue with her mother’s ghost. In an inversion of Derrida’s paternal specter and its inheritance, Meredith appropriates the words of power previously associated with her father’s possession of the law and its documents, re-performing them in the context of a memorialising gesture—a repetition of her

mother's "I crossed the threshold of my own accord." Significant also is that Meredith experiences this moment of memorialising speech as a confluence of pasts and futures; in the words of the story:

The strands of the web, the ticking of a clock, the life and death of stars, each step towards Armageddon checked off in her aching head ... All of these events, all of these men and their actions. Lies and blood and betrayals, links in the chain, leading, finally, to this moment, to that ninth wave, mightier than the last, all in flame. (23)

Through recognising that threat is tied affectively to the many narratives of human life, to what her mother describes as "intersections and interweaves" (23), Meredith corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the artist as "a seer, a becomer," in that she "has seen something in life that is too great, too unbearable also, and the mutual embrace of life with what threatens it" (*What is Philosophy?* 171). Her artistry involves making the primary sensation of threat (fear) into an embracing or clinching of the threatened life, *her* life ("Make the fear your shield. Make the fear your lance") (22), and thereby constructing a true monument to life in general. According to Deleuze and Guattari, such a monument is never fixed or docile in its relationship to time, in that it

does not commemorate or celebrate something that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event: the constantly renewed suffering of men and women, their re-created protestations, their constantly resumed struggle. (*What is Philosophy?* 176-77)

Human narratives of suffering "embody the event" of threat, the *eventernal* threat that never arrives, but whose echo is felt in the minor disasters accompanying every life at every time in the lead-up to death—what the story refers to as "the tragedy of mankind" (14). In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze distinguishes between two kinds of death: (1) "[d]eath as event, inseparable from the past and future into which it is divided, never present, an impersonal death"; (2) and

“then personal death, which occurs and is actualized in the most harsh present,” and which entails the freedom to confront death on one’s own terms (32). In “Andromeda Among the Stones,” Meredith refuses death as event, the impersonal past-and-future threat-time of death, instead opting to own death’s personal, radical present as a time which valorises her own struggle. Her memorial is tied to her “suffering,” but crucially it is a personal, *knowing* suffering (“You cannot be led to bear this weight in ignorance of the pain that comes with the key”) (22), a suffering freely chosen in the speech of the present, and narrativized by it.

By the end of the story, Meredith’s minor victory over threat is confirmed, her injunction echoed in the narrative’s own third person like an epitaphic *lest we forget*: “Meredith Dandridge made her fear a shield and a lance and held the line” (24). Through inscribing her life-story, and its penultimate moment, at the heart of threat’s disjointed present, Meredith Dandridge becomes both Andromeda *and* Perseus, a heroine who fights her own battles and lives to tell of them. Even with the death of her humanity, as she becomes the monstrous, barnacle-scarred sentinel she was always born to be, she endures as a monument on the gateway to the Deep Ones, as “her voice grew stronger and more terrible as the years rushed past” (25). Symbolically speaking, Kiernan’s tale, which is Meredith’s own, demonstrates how threat’s endless potential is correlative of life’s own hidden possibilities—both are “always only a matter of time” (14). Threat affect’s potential to stand for something redemptive is assured, so long as it has some “constantly resumed” human narrative to accompany it (177).

## Conclusion

Ultimately, threat is an ambivalent intensity in weird fiction. Its affect clusters around futurity, in the form of feelings of uncertainty and dread, making it an ideal analogue for interpreting the weird’s horror poetics. However, at the same time there remains a sense in

which threat is qualitatively neutral, open to contested readings. This is due to the fact that threat, like any affect, has no moral compass, no all-too-human sense of good and evil as paradigms which could distribute, or name, the flux of its uncertainty. In this sense, threat affect is an important addition to weird fiction's speculative repository, since it works to support the mode's cosmic frame of reference. In the words of Lovecraft's "The Silver Key" (1929), threat affect is often accompanied by an intrinsic awareness that "good and evil and beauty and ugliness are only ornamental fruits of perspective," a mindfulness that is frequently prone to being effaced by human interpretations, binarisms that have "blindly molded our little spheres out of the rest of chaos" (195).

In other words, the intensities and feelings accompanying threat affect are always contingent on what humans bring to the table, the misgivings and blind resignations which form the human aspect of threat's sensation bloc. In "Shadow: A Parable" and "The Call of Cthulhu" sensation takes the form of a fearful anticipation, in which human characters hold their breath in thrall to a nameless future. In both stories, proleptic language is servile to an absent yet potent threat; warnings, hints, implications, and fearful anticipations all work to support threat's reality in language, paradoxically by making its form even more amorphous. "Shadow" and "Cthulhu" are, in each case, reducible to a "naming" and a "call," each of which is the product of human intervention, a language of response to an unknown problematic. However, while both stories present human languages of threat-response as legitimating threat's reality, this is not the case throughout weird fiction. Indeed, as I have demonstrated, many weird tales transform the composition of threat affect by adding pathos to its matrix. The interjection of a human response that doesn't merely react to and seek to allay threat, but evolves in coterminous relation with it, signifies a humanism in weird fiction that is often overlooked. While the weird may reject anthropomorphic modes of stratifying reality, it nonetheless seeks to salvage something from the remains—to paraphrase the title of

Thomas Ligotti's essay, it seeks a consolation for horror. In effect, the manner in which characters in weird fiction respond to threat affect carves out a space wherein such a consolation can be obtained, a refuge restored to a disinterested cosmos.



## **“Transfixed in the Order of the Unreal”: A Weird Conclusion**

In Thomas Ligotti’s “Vastarien” (1989), the protagonist Victor Keirion dreams nightly of a stygian city whose “high towers” reach “nightward to attain the farthest possible remove from the world below,” and which is peopled, as though in mockery of human form, with manikins, and “shadow-puppets” (236). In his attempts to “dwell among [these] ruins of reality,” he is aided later in the story by a book which seems to be a narrative or textual metonym for the world of his dreams. Book and cityscape fuse in the form of a narrative “topography” ruled by the “marvels of miscreation,” and where “imperfection [becomes] the source of the miraculous” (244; 245). For Keirion, the “hypnotic episodes of the little book” come to signify “the summit or abyss of the unreal,” a counter-narrative to that of the quotidian waking world, and a “paradise of exhaustion, confusion, and debris where reality ends” (245).

Like many of Ligotti’s stories, “Vastarien” is a microcosm for weird fiction’s worldview, and for the vision of the weird supported by my argument. The story exemplifies the genre-awareness of the weird, its insight into its own history, devices, and obsessions, as well as the narratology that so often distils its philosophy into a recognisable pattern (or non-pattern). Above all, “Vastarien” functions as an ode to the weird trope of the forbidden document, a love letter to the transgressive, alternative stories of world-ness that forbidden textualities make possible. In a way similar to other tales I have discussed in more detail, like “The Library of Babel” and “The Call of Cthulhu,” Ligotti’s tale theorises why so much of the weird is fixated on the book, the library, the archive of disparate sources whose contents correlate oblivion. Forbidden documents suggest alternate ways of reading the world, modes of narrativising opposed to the conventional, sensible frameworks for interpretation we are

used to. In the weird, language, text, and discourse, so often supportive of dominant paradigms or orders become, in their forbidden forms, holes and gaps, fissures in both the world and in the comforting stories we use to make sense of it. To paraphrase Miéville, the forbidden-ness of weird texts opens up lacunae in the world-story, a concealed abyss swarming with monsters that are always “looking at us.” As I have argued throughout, such monsters are not only of the embodied, tentacled variety: in weird fiction, monsters can manifest as questions, utterances, affects, incomprehensible bodies without organs or morphologies. Forbidden documents are, literally, plot holes in our narrative, artefacts that signal an incoherence in the great tale of being.

However, holes in the plot of the human story are, in weird fiction, just as likely to be portals, thresholds for crossing into new narrative pathways and nonhuman angles of interpretation. If the conceptual framework of the weird could be said to involve humans in its counter-narrative at all, other than as victims or puppets of a will greater than their own, it is as concepts in themselves, fallible and easily negated principles drifting amidst a cosmos that dwarfs them. The weird frequently adheres to Lovecraft’s dictum regarding the transmutation of characters into “principles”:

Individuals and their fortunes within natural law move me very little. They are all momentary trifles bound from a common nothingness toward another common nothingness. Only the cosmic framework itself—or such individuals as symbolise principles (or defiances of principles)—can gain a deep grip on my imagination and set it to work creating. In other words, the only ‘heroes’ I can write about are phenomena. (“Letter to E. Hoffmann Price” 33)

An easy criticism of much weird fiction from Lovecraft’s time is that it lacks well-rounded characterisation. Human beings are frequently represented in the weird as cardboard caricatures, facile in nature, dull in personality, and easily forgettable as anything other than a victim of a colourfully hideous doom. Lovecraft’s words here from a letter to E. Hoffmann

Price offer a way of reading thinness of characterisation as a strength, rather than a weakness, of the genre. While the best weird fiction works with or without psychological depth, it also strives to move the human beyond its status as a psychological entity or self, and into the realm of the phenomenological—as an abstractly finite conglomeration of principles, “or defiances of principles,” that is easily dispersed by the many counter-principles of weird narrative (the “common nothingness[es]” Lovecraft speaks of here).

It is this lack of reliance on an anthropocentric human logic for interpreting its own narratives that gives the weird its “weirdness.” Indeed, weird fiction’s interest in phenomena, and its stylised negation of concepts and principles by others, gives a clue to the reason why the name “weird fiction” has remained so durably suitable over the decades. As I have mentioned, one of the sources for “weird” has its root in the Old English *weorðan*, meaning “to become.” The idea of weird fiction as a process of becoming, in which human, world, and narrative are gradually estranged from each other in ever more terrifying ways, is potentially a more persuasive etymological definition of the genre than any association with fate and the supernatural earmarked by the more commented-upon “wyrd.” Further, the even earlier root for *weorðan*, the Proto-Indo-European “wert,” adds another dimension to the processual becomings of weird fiction, invoking the acts of “turning,” “winding,” and twisting. Taking *weorðan* and “wert” together as the key semiotic referents of the weird, one can extrapolate a kind of fiction which uses language to turn, wind, and twist narrative in an ongoing process of perverse experimentation. In particular, the “become” of *weorðan* chimes with what Deleuze says about Lovecraft’s “powerful oeuvre” at the beginning of his essay “Literature and Life,” that “becomings ... coexist at every level” of his fiction, “following the doorways, thresholds, and zones that make up the entire universe” (1). It is the emphasis on the anonymity of process, and the perverse twisting thereof, that arguably makes weird tales like Ligotti’s “The Red Tower” work so well. The latter story could well be taken as the purest

expression of Lovecraft's philosophy of "principles" of the "cosmic framework" coming into "defiance" or conflict, given the extent to which it reduces the human to one residue among many in the greater process of "discolouration" depicted in its narrative.

Given the weird's emphasis on the nonhuman, one of the most interesting developments of the genre's recent re-popularisation has been its adoption by the philosophers and theorists associated with the Object-Oriented Ontology, or Speculative Realist, movement. Authors, typically those published by the independent imprint Zero Books, such as Graham Harman (*Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*), Eugene Thacker (author of the *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy), Ben Woodward (*Slime Dynamics* and *On an Ungrounded Earth: Towards a New Geophilosophy*), Dylan Trigg (*The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror*), and Reza Negarestani (*Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*) all approach the weird not as genre fiction, but as a methodological language to construct radically materialist counter-narratives of their own. Many of the authors and texts listed above could be said to have utilised the inverse of my own methodology: instead of using theory and philosophy to read the weird, they use weird fiction itself as a conceptual framework to re-interpret the history of philosophy, from Edmund Husserl (a favourite of Harman's) to Deleuze.

The nascent connection between weird fiction and the philosophical horror of the speculative realists can be measured by the enduring success of two publications, each of which make explicit the debt that each field owes to the other. The first, the Volume Four edition of the speculative realist journal *Collapse* (tellingly subtitled *Concept Horror*), contains, among the expected contributions of Thacker and Harman, two essays from weird fiction authors whose fiction and nonfiction have been discussed throughout this thesis: China Miéville and Thomas Ligotti. Significantly, Ligotti's piece, "Thinking Horror," sowed the seeds for what would later become his own engagement with horror as philosophy (and

vice versa), the anti-natalist broadside against the platitudes of philosophical optimism *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2005). The second publication, *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* edited by Ann and Jeff Vandermeer, is notable for anthologising a lengthy excerpt from Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*, entitled "Dust Enforcer." The idea that a piece of work nominally considered theory or philosophy could contribute to the mythology of the weird in a way endorsed by the genre's gatekeepers would have been unthinkable even a decade ago. That the editors refer to *Cyclonopedia* in their description of the excerpt as "[p]erhaps the most innovative and audacious weird text of the decade" indicates how far weird fiction criticism has come in terms of approaching the genre as a language for re-theorising the real (1069).

Negarestani's magnum opus could be said to represent the apex of speculative realism's self-theorising ambition. Its blurb describes it in the most syncretic of terms, which admit of no distinction between horror narrative and philosophical tract: "At once a horror fiction, a work of speculative theology, an atlas of demonology, a political samizdat and a philosophic grimoire, *Cyclonopedia* is a work of theory-fiction on the Middle East, where horror is restlessly heaped upon horror" (back cover). Such categorical slipperiness recognises, in itself, the need for a radically weird set of narrative strategies to interpret the apocalyptic horrors of our time, a virtual *Necronomicon* to read the ever-worsening crisis of post-capitalist geopolitics. *Cyclonopedia* suggests many future pathways for further research, even in the areas explored in the chapters of this thesis. In particular, it offers a way of interpreting the weird's use of threat affect (see Chapter Six) along both geopolitical and socio-political lines. In cataloguing the demonic entities he sees as metaphysically governing the war on terror, Negarestani describes threat in terms of a xenophobia whose fear of the other generates its own Cthulhu-esque terror-mythos:

The human defense mechanism is the most consistent entity on this planet; its self-fertilizing paranoia is capable of grasping and identifying every contact in terms of a potential incursion. When this paranoid consistency ... attains autonomy, it becomes ruthlessly schizoid by passively opening itself to unknown threats from the Outside. (1072)

To paraphrase Miéville, Negarestani's schizoid paranoia rends further holes in an already porous world-narrative of safety and refuge. Like Lovecraft's pantheon, the chimerical horrors in Negarestani's bestiary are both actual and virtual, inhering in the very language that affectively performs the fear and terror associated with them. Given *Cyclonopedia's* stated goal of en-weirding the narrative of conflict in the Middle East throughout history, a good example of such performative threat demonology might be found in the rhetoric associated with American fear-mongering, and in the loud and vacuous sloganeering of politicians.

\* \* \*

Weird fiction's critical engagement with the idea of world schema, and the narratives of world-ness we construct to make sense of our place in it, has been at the forefront of discussion throughout my thesis. I began, in Chapter One, with a critique of Lovecraft scholar S. T. Joshi's theoretical work on the weird as a genre, arguing that his correlation of the weird with a certain "worldview" missed the point regarding the kind of world-engagement weird fiction sets up. Far from demonstrating any authorial cohesion of perspectives over time, with certain writers of the weird having their own worldviews equated with a generic norm, weird fiction promulgates an anti-worldview; in other words, the genre directs our attention to the impossibility of formulating a view of the world of any kind, especially of a kind that could make sense to us in a narrative of our own choosing. I then argued that China Miéville's interventions in weird criticism were necessary in order to furnish the weird with an adequate

concept of world, both in terms of its approach to narrative world-building and to the philosophising of world as a concept. Miéville's genre studies altered the frame and meaning of world with respect to the weird, in order to take account of the way the genre stages and reflects a crisis of representation. Presenting a gloss on Fredric Jameson's division of exoteric and esoteric worlds in romantic fantasy, I posited Miéville's image of the "threadbare" and "incomplete" "world-weave," whose many holes conceal monsters, as the archetypal anti-world schema of the weird. Further, by extrapolating from Heidegger's concept of *Angst* and the Heideggerean implications of Jameson's romantic fantasy world model ("romance is that form in which the *world-ness* of *world* reveals itself"), I concluded that weird fiction operates in inverse fashion to fantasy: the weird is a form in which the world reveals itself as a spectral absence, a diegetic blank masked only intermittently by human narratives of meaning and truth. My subsequent discussion of the work of John Frow, and his research on the distinction between genres and modes, provided another, more semiotic dimension to my definition of the weird as a narrative form opposed to world-building and worldview. Weird fiction challenges the often unconscious binary separating genre and mode in Frow's methodology and others: the dual correlation of genre with world, and mode with speech/language. The weird's status as a mode, exemplifying as it does "certain forms and modalities of speech," is exactly what allows it to interrogate and theorise concerning its generic frames. In other words, the weird's self-theorising obsession with language gives it the tools it needs to critique whatever genre or generic world frames its stories. Straddling the ground between genre and mode, the weird is, more than either one or the other, an attitude, a terrifyingly ludic textual drive to confound narrative cohesion, and to riddle world plans, *any* world plans, with as many lacunae as possible.

In Chapter Two, I took my discussion of weird fiction semiotics to the level of the sentence. One of the ways the weird problematizes conventional narrative formations is by

investing certain speech acts with, to quote J. L. Austin, the power to “self-stultify” in a positive sense. The quintessential weird speech act, naming the unnameable, effects a form of negative representation that overcomes itself, and the restrictions placed on it by conventional language. The weird speech act dramatises the terror of humans encountering an other seemingly outside of language, a referent that exceeds analysis and portends a gap in human cognition. However, the act ultimately reveals that this other was part of language’s drama all along, and that the act’s failure was part of the show of its success. The true horror suggested by naming the unnameable is that there is no outside of language, and that the unnameable monsters themselves are a product of language’s own inescapably nebulous pathways. In naming or describing that which, in the terms laid out in dozens of weird tales, cannot be named or described, the weird speech act circles ouroboros-like around the course of its syntax, and, in doing so, tears a breach in the structures of meaning and reference we take for granted. The poetics of theology’s ineffable or numinous, and of the Kantian sublime in aesthetics, provide analogues for interpreting the self-devouring logic of the weird speech act. As well as furnishing the weird speech act with many of the standard words of its vocabulary—“unnameable,” “indescribable,” “unfathomable,” etc.—theories of the sublime and the ineffable offer methods for interpreting the semiotic basis of the act’s negative representation.

Chapter Three signalled a movement from language use in weird fiction to the spaces in which language is stored. The weird library, I argued, occupies a dual status within the genre as both site and metaphor. It forms a space wherein highly symbolic activities of ordering and classifying textual material occur, while also signifying a symbol in itself, an emblem for the well-ordered and idealistic narrative schema humans attach to their place in the world. As many critics have pointed out however, the symbolic library is a false idol; as a structure that is easily beset by problems of mis-classification and disorder, it frequently fails



to support the logocentric ideologies we project into it. Further, as much as libraries can appear homely in their organisation and accessibility, they also have the potential to overwhelm their prospective users with the sheer weight of the knowledge they contain. As Manguel points out, in browsing the library's seemingly endless corridors, "[o]ne may be overcome by horror—at the clutter or the vastness, the stillness, the mocking reminder of everything one doesn't know" (5). Weird fiction frequently distils this library anxiety into a literal horror, wherein the "vastness" of the library's textuality attains esoteric and malign dimensions. The ubiquity of the library motif in the weird makes it the most characteristic chronotope of the genre, a narrative time-space which, in Bakhtinian terms, is fundamentally centrifugal and chaotic in nature. Weird library tales such as Borges's "The Library of Babel" and Samuels's "A Contaminated Text" dramatise the library's world of knowledge becoming a nightmare. In both stories, characters find themselves displaced from the centre of the library by competing and more powerful forces, emanating from text. Knowledge and truth become a protean mass of contradictions which inevitably spiral into nonsense the more the characters read.

Chapter Four continued the discussion of the weird library, but with a crucial difference in perspective and methodology. As well as manifesting a narrative time-space in which time forms the most significant dimension, weird fiction's library is also fundamentally heterotopian: in other words, it is a space in which time is simply a discourse, an accumulated totality supporting a liveable utopian fiction. As a heterotopia however, the weird library is also dangerously unstable and, like the chronotope, dialogic, prone to pass from a hypertopian order to a hypotopian disorder at any moment. In weird fiction, this slippage takes horrifying form via the very thing the library's utopian logocentrisms seek to keep in check: texts and textuality. In stories such as Lovecraft's "The Shadow Out of Time," text attains a malign velocity, transforming human narratives of knowledge and desire into

footnotes in the history of a nonhuman life cycle. The tendency for the weird library heterotopia to not only expose the finitude of human narratives and discourses, but also to supplant them with nonhuman narratives, reaches a crescendo in my analysis of Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" and Ligotti's "Nethescurial." Although separated by over fifty years, these weird tales represent similar treatments of a single theme: the dangers of archival excavation and the threat posed by the pathologies inherent in such research. The diabolical entities Cthulhu and Nethescurial signify the unthinkable of text, the void-zone between the real and the allegorical valences of narrative. In line with both Jacques Derrida's conception of *mal d'archive* (archive fever) and Paul de Man's theory of the theotrope, both stories defamiliarise the archive as a site for the recovery of human origin narratives in favour of dramatising a conflict between human seekers of truth and a nightmarish textual avatar.

In Chapter Five I moved the discussion back to the topic of weird fiction's language and performativity, specifically in the way it develops an idiom capable of conveying the subtleties of particular affects. The weird is governed by a narrative logic that drifts into, out of, and in between states that are cogent and exact: transformation is the norm, and subversion of conventional patterns of narrativising experience is the goal. Consequently, the weird requires that its language, and the modality of its encounters with the monstrous, registers the liminality of affect's many transformations. To understand the weird's affective grammar in a more precise way, I compared it with Derrida's theory of hauntology in the way it clusters around the disquieting moment of the look, and the establishment of a spectral dialogue with the thing that 'looks.' Derrida's hauntological dictum about "learning to live with ghosts" is relevant to the study of weird in that weird affect and hauntology demand a language of response to the fundamentally alien nature of the world and its history. Contrary to Miéville's contention that the weird and the hauntological represent opposing responses to the representational crisis of modernity, I contended that the two are aligned in their

obsession with lacunae, and the ghost-speech of the “non-present present” (Derrida’s affective moment par excellence). In Lovecraft’s “The Outsider” and Ligotti’s “The Red Tower,” spectral dialogue generates affect along both personal and pre-personal, or impersonal lines. In Lovecraft’s story, affect manifests as a desire to reclaim a narrative of identity and selfhood, a quest that is fractured by the untimely recognition of the haunted seeker’s reflection. In “The Red Tower,” affect’s spectral dialogue inheres in a conflict between two spaces without human presence; the red and grey war machines are ultimately revealed to be the twin faces of a post-capitalist uncertainty, an interregnum whose narrative is our own haunting inheritance. Crucially, both tales represent sensation in fundamentally nonhuman terms, allowing affect to speak for itself in all its immediacy.

Having examined utterances, sites, and affects which illuminate the weird’s opposition to narrative and world, in the sixth and final chapter I illustrate the defining counter-narrative of world-ness told by the weird: threat and threat affect. Threat affect is narratological in that it constitutes a temporality of perspective: reaching forward and backward in time simultaneously, it is lived only in the present as an abiding fear without a concrete source. Threat affect is the fearful residue of a narrative left unfinished, that will never be finished. Promising apocalypse yet never delivering it, threat affect glares at us from an unsuspected gap in the world-weave that can never be closed. Weird fiction adopts a performative strategy for engaging with the limitless potential of threat affect: its malignity inheres in the weird’s dialogue with past and future, in the what ifs and fearful speculations that bookend each horizon. In Poe’s “Shadow: A Parable” and “The Call of Cthulhu,” threat affect is figured in the form of the eponymous entities. The Shadow and Cthulhu are notable for being omnipresent in their stories without being present as such. Nebulous and out of time, they represent traces that never quite reveal themselves and their full potential, but which are yet made visible in performative gestures that cluster around “Shadow” and

“Cthulhu” as proper names. However, while threat affect may appear implacable, omnipotent in the way it generates its own reality ahead of time, the weird also offers redemption for the humans caught in its jaws. Caitlin R. Kiernan’s “Andromeda Among the Stones” offers a reconfiguration of threat affect’s narrative, returning the human to the scene of the story if not the centre. Kiernan’s tale never mitigates the horror of threat affect but, crucially, allows humans to co-exist with. By accepting threat’s indefatigable reality, Kiernan’s characters are not simply passive victims, but are given the authority to accept the threatened present as their moment. In doing so, even in the face of rising horrors from the deep, they are able to construct symbolic monuments to life and the dead via an affective language of their own (“This is where I stand”) (Kiernan 25). My analysis of Kiernan’s story potentially opens up a pathway for more research on the subject of pathos and characterisation in weird fiction: in particular, the way in which characters struggle to make sense of their newly revealed place in an alien cosmos, and the shame, fear, and longing associated with the loss of selfhood such alienation brings, seems to be a broad avenue for further inquiry.

\* \* \*

Returning finally to the matter of genre and the weird, it is significant that the freshest and most vital attempts to capture the *spirit* of weird fiction—what Gelder calls the “attitudinal” “sensibility” unique to every popular genre—have come in the form of online messageboards and internet forum discussions. Such vitality reminds us that the attitudinal sensibility of a genre is always accompanied by an attitudinal *sensitivity* on the part of its readers, a “subtle attitude of awed listening” with respect to the mysteries of the genre’s own secret language (“Supernatural Horror in Literature” 427). The online communities of writers and readers centring around Thomas Ligotti and M. John Harrison (authors who, incidentally, are

both anthologised in the Vandermeer-curated collection *The Weird*) lend credence to a theory of genre as an ongoing conversation or “argument” rather than a taxonomy, to paraphrase Harrison message-board contributor Henry Farrell. Ultimately, perhaps the most persuasive attempts at defining the weird carry with them something of Otto’s “creature-feeling,” an awed silence in the face of weird fiction’s visionary and numinous possibilities. Speaking too much on the subject of an enigma always has the potential to despoil it somehow, to relegate it to the base object of an equally base and mundane language. If the weird has anything conforming to Frow’s generic “horizon of expectation” about it, it is the expectation of a mystery left satisfyingly unsolved.

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